

# **Fluidity in Identity: The Muslims of Bara, Nepal**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Central Department of Sociology, MPhil-PhD Programme in Sociology.

Tribhuvan University, Nepal.

In the Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement of the Degree of Master of Philosophy in Sociology

Submitted by:

Amir Raja

Batch: 2020

Roll No: 23

Second Semester Symbol No: 2032322

T.U Regd No: 8-2-41-132-2016

2024

**Tribhuvan University  
Central Department of Sociology  
Kirtipur, Kathmandu**

**Letter of Recommendation**

This is to certify that Mr. Amir Raja has completed his dissertation entitled “**Fluidity in Identity: The Muslims of Bara, Nepal**” under my guidance and supervision in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of MPhil in Sociology. I hereby recommend this dissertation for final approval and acceptance.

.....  
**Supervisor**  
Prof. Dr. Chaitanya Mishra  
Central Department of Sociology  
Tribhuvan University  
Kathmandu

**Tribhuvan University**  
**Faculty of Humanities and Social Science**  
**Central Department of Sociology**  
**MPhil-PhD Programme in Sociology**

**Letter of Approval**

This dissertation entitled “**Fluidity in Identity: The Muslims of Bara, Nepal**” submitted by **Mr. Amir Raja** for final examination by the Research Committee of the MPhil-PhD Programme in Sociology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Science, Tribhuvan University, in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the **Degree of Master of Philosophy** in Sociology. The Research Committee hereby certifies that this dissertation was found satisfactory and accepted for the degree.

**Research Committee:**

Prof. Dr. Chaitanya Mishra  
Dissertation Supervisor .....

Associate Prof. Dr. Youba Raj Luintel  
(Head of Department) .....

Prof. Dr. Surendra Mishra  
External Examiner .....

Associate Prof. Dr. Pasang Sherpa  
External Examiner .....

Date: April, 2024

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Chaitanya Mishra, for his unwavering support, inspiration, suggestions, encouragement, and constructive feedback throughout my research study. His regular guidance and remarks made the successful completion of my study possible. Moreover, I sincerely thank the University Grants Commission, Sanothimi Bhaktapur, for providing UGC MPhil Fellowship 2078/79. The fellowship provided by UGC helped me to carry out my MPhil-level study.

I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to all my teachers in the Central Department of Sociology, who always helped me by sharing their knowledge and experiences. I am very much thankful to the Central Department of Sociology for providing me an opportunity to explore my horizon in the field of sociology, especially to improve my understanding of issues like the constructionist line of dealing with identity. It helped me to develop my interest in the field of research. I hope my dissertation is helpful to those interested in the issues of dealing with micro-macro linkages to critically understand the role of social structure in identity construction.

My special thanks to all the participants for sharing their valuable time and their personal experiences. I also want to appreciate their warm welcome and dearest attitude without which I might not have completed this work. I also want to thank the local residents of Bara district for their support and cooperation.

I am very much blessed and thankful to my parents for their constant love and support in carrying out my studies. My mother and sisters assisted and supported me in the journey of fieldwork. My thanks and appreciation also go to my friends for their suggestions and compliments.

**Amir Raja**

**April, 2024**

## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that the dissertation entitled “**Fluidity in Identity: The Muslims of Bara, Nepal**” submitted by me to the Central Department of Sociology, Tribhuvan University is entirely original work prepared under the guidance and supervision of Prof. Dr. Chaitanya Mishra. I have made due acknowledgments of all ideas and information borrowed from different sources in the course of writing this thesis. The result presented in this study has not been submitted and presented anywhere else for the award of any degree or other reason. I am solely responsible if any evidence is found against my declaration.

**Amir Raja**

**April, 2024**

## **Abstract**

The research study juxtaposes personal identity within a larger social structure and longer-run history and concludes that identity is a fluid entity. It examines how changing local, national, and global contexts affect and reshape the identity of the Muslims living in Tarai in Nepal. The change in identity is traced by investigating the growing influence of macro factors like— nation-state; modern education, science, and technology; access to social media; travel, urbanization, and international migration; geo-political positioning of Nepal and its relationship with India and Islamic states—in the life of an individual. This line of thinking, of course, departs from one that assumes primordial claims of identity and one that visualizes identity to be fixed, permanent, clear-cut, solid, rigid, stable, and bounded. It also rejects the conventional and long-held anthropological understanding of ethnic identity that emphasizes biology and descent as also the claim that identity is something essential and pure.

The study is qualitative in nature and is based on primary data collected from life history interview of the participants selected through purposive sampling. It includes interviewing ten male Muslims who were over the age of fifty and who held diverse occupations. The research site was in Kalaiya, Bara. There is a follow-up of the changes in the self-identity of participants at different phases of their lives. The life stages of participants are divided into age categories of 15, 30, 45, and above 50 to trace the corresponding changes. The findings of the research show the changes in the local religious Muslim-hood of participants in a time-structure. There is a fluctuation in the Muslim-hood and Madhesi-hood in the life of participants due to the impact of the nation-state from—the schooling promoted by the government; policies and legal provisions of the Nepali state; and, the national or regional movement (Madhesh Movement). Similarly, processes like travel, urbanization, and international migration have also influenced Muslim manhood and the image of Hindu-hood of the participants over the years. Moreover, the growing influence of social media intensifying the impact of India and other Islamic States has also altered the religious way of life of participants.

## Table of Contents

Letter of Recommendation.....	ii
Letter of Approval .....	iii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
Declaration.....	v
Abstract.....	vi
Acronyms and Abbreviations.....	ix
<b>Chapter One: Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Background of the Study.....	1
1.2 Statement of Research Problem .....	2
1.3 Objective .....	4
1.4 Importance of Study .....	5
1.5 From Research Problem to Theory .....	6
1.6 Theoretical Framework .....	6
<b>Chapter Two: Identity Debate and Muslims of Tarai Nepal: Literature Review .....</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1 Macro Social Structure and Historical Context: Constructionist view of Identity .....	8
2.2 The Muslims of Nepal: A Brief Overview .....	13
2.3 Empirical Context .....	18
2.4 Research Gap.....	20
2.5 Conceptual Framework .....	22
<b>Chapter Three: Research Methodology.....</b>	<b>25</b>
3.1 Nature of Research .....	25
3.2 The Field and Rationale of Site Selection.....	27
3.3 Research Design.....	28
3.4 Methods of Data Collection .....	30
3.5 Profile of Participants/Informants .....	32
3.6 Data Analysis .....	33
3.7 Limitation of Study .....	34
3.8 Ethical Consideration .....	34
3.9 Field Reflection .....	35

<b>Chapter Four: Impact of Local Context, Nation-State, and Modern Education on Muslim Identity .....</b>	<b>37</b>
4.1 Influence of Local Context on the Identity of Muslims .....	37
4.2 Influence of Nation-State Resulting Shift in Identity.....	39
4.3 Impact of Modern Education in Bringing Shift in Identity.....	44
<b>Chapter Five: Influence of Travel, Social Media, and Relationship with India and Other Islamic States on Muslim Identity .....</b>	<b>50</b>
5.1 Growing Influence of Travel, Urbanization, and International Migration in resulting to the shift in Identity .....	50
5.2 Increasing Role of Social Media, Science, and Technology Leading to a Shift in Identity.....	57
5.3 Effect of India and Other Islamic States to Result a Shift in Identity.....	61
5.4 Socio-Biological Factors Bringing Shift in Identity .....	65
<b>Chapter Six: Fluidity in Muslim Identity: Key Findings and Conclusion .....</b>	<b>68</b>
Key Findings .....	68
6.1 Participants experiencing a shift in self-identity with regard to Muslimhood over the years.....	68
6.2 Participants experiencing a shift in self-identity with regard to Muslim manhood and Muslim womanhood over the years .....	70
6.3 Participants experiencing a shift in self-identity with regard to caste hood and image of Hindu-hood over the years .....	72
6.4 Participants experiencing a shift in self-identity with regard to Nepalihood and Madhesihood over the years .....	75
Conclusion.....	76

References

Annexes

## **Acronyms and Abbreviations**

CBS:	Central Bureau of Statistics
COVID-19:	Corona Virus Disease of 2019
HDI:	Human Development Index
NHDR:	National Human Development Report
NSII:	Nepal Multidimensional Social Inclusion Index
PRSP:	Poverty Reduction Strategy Plan
UGC:	University Grants Commission

# Chapter One

## Introduction

### 1.1 Background of the Study

The primordial claim of identity contains fundamental error as it projects identity as fixed, permanent, clear-cut, solid, rigid, stable, and bounded. Similarly, the conventional and long-held anthropological understanding of ethnic identity as pure and essential by emphasizing biology and descent is also problematic. Such orientation fails to locate the changes in identity in a socio-historical context. This research study is based on the assumption that identity is fluid; that is, identity undergoes continuous changes in juxtaposition to a larger structure and longer run. Based on this assumption, the research paper attacks the primordial claim that projects Muslims as a single homogenized static category by the study of Muslims of Nepal. There is an examination of how the changes in local, national, and global spheres have influenced the identity of Muslims.

At the macro level, Nepal has experienced changes after the collapse of the Rana dictatorship in 1951 (Luintel, 2018; Mishra, 2011). There has been intense interaction with the members of multiple ethnic, caste, regional, and religious groups. This also includes changes in the Tarai region, which became open with intensified migration from the hilly region after the 1950s malaria eradication project. Similarly, there has been a shift from rural and agricultural to urban and non-agricultural modes of livelihood. Also, the changes incorporate the pick in the democratization process, extension of rights and privileges of citizenship as opposed to subjecthood, growing effect of the modern bureaucratic state, the hype in literacy rate, and international migration. In the global sphere, there has been a transition in the world- systemic structure with deeper penetration of the nation-state, increment in the democratization process and liberalization, and the growing impact of globalization and capitalism with the rise of ethnic politics in the world (Mishra, 2011). In this context of ongoing structural changes, fluidity of identity signifies that the construction of identity is simultaneously new (in the sense of being a novel combination) and retrogressive (reestablishing category along primordial line), as admitted by Fisher (2011).

To scrutinize the fluidity of identity in the research, several linked factors that have continuously affected the constitution of Muslims have been investigated. This includes a close consideration of tracing— the effect of the legal provisions; government education; government policies; the increasing impact of travel, urbanization, and international migration; the influence of social media, science, and technology; the consequence of the relation with India and other Islamic States—in the identity of Tarai Muslims.

## **1.2 Statement of Research Problem**

In the available literatures, there is very less study about Muslims of Nepal and the research work covering the issue of Tarai region (which is also major residence for about 97 % Muslims) is also fewer when compared it with hill region of Nepal. The literatures covering the issue of Nepali Muslims like Seddon (2017), Upadhyay (2014) and Sijapati (2011) accepted the heterogeneity among Muslims however, there is lack of study inquiring about Tarai Muslim, in particular.

Similarly, the authors working on Muslims highlighted that the status of Muslims as a religious minority who are unevenly scattered in primarily Hindu dominated Nepalese society. However, the literatures addressing the changes among Muslim identity due to their long stay in the societies with dominance of contrasting Hindu religion (generally assumed Islam as *ulto dharma* to Hindu) is lacking. The effort of Sijapati (2011) is crucial in the sense that it has focused how the changing nation-state, that is, the changing of Nepali state to secular democratic republic Nepal, has impacted the Muslims of Nepal. However, this account has solely linked the changes with respect to nation-state and it neglects other linked causes. In the same way, the account of Sijapati (2011) provides too generic explanations that neglects the heterogenous picture of Muslims of Nepal and their positioning within Nepal; the country with full of diversity.

Moreover, after 1950 mainly in the last three decades, Nepal has experienced considerable changes in its social, political and economic realm (Luintel, 2018; Mishra, 2011). In this changing context, the social construction of identity goes through a continuous interaction due to the influence from factors within the nation-state and beyond nation-state. This

includes the changes due to growing influence of factors like— capitalism, democratization, urbanization, globalization, literacy, social media, migration, geopolitics and position of state in world-system. The available literatures lack the in-detailed historical account of how the Tarai Muslim and their identity are changing due to the changing of context.

The ongoing political debates as well as framing of policies in Nepal have basically focused on the fixed and clearcut demarcation of identities. There is existing practice of categorizing Muslims in the name of broader categories like ‘Muslims as a religious disadvantaged minority’ and ‘Madhesi.’ The formation of such categories is facing academic as well as political disputes. For Gautam (2015), ‘Madhesi’ as a category includes Tarai Brahman/Chhetri, Tarai Dalit, Tarai Janajati, other Tarai Castes, and Muslims including heterogeneous Bahuns. These intra-categorical inequalities within a single category, Madhesi, can further arise a debate of inclusion-exclusion on the basis of religion, caste, class, and gender within Madhesi itself (Subedi & Gautam, 2016). Similarly, the Muslims themselves are constituted of heterogeneity in the work of academicians. Such disputes are also inviting researcher and academicians to study on identity and its understanding.

Moreover, my observation of more than 25 years and my reflexivity as a Muslim over the years also became a reason which attracted me to several unresolved questions. The way of perception of girls' education to modern schooling has changed for almost every member of my family, including other Muslims in the locality. Similarly, I have witnessed how most Muslims in my locality during the Madesh Movement actively enrolled in the Movement for their recognition as Madhesi while in the later phase of their life, mainly after the Covid-19 pandemic when the Muslims were discriminated for their religious belonging as Muslim, they insisted for their religious recognition as Muslim rather than Madhesi. Such changes in Muslimhood, Madheshihood, and the image of Muslim womanhood over the years added unexplored questions for me to understand the identity of an individual in changing times and contexts.

In this context, this paper can be a small effort of input in addressing the research gap. From the line of sociological research, this paper can contribute to the sociological knowledge in the area of social change and social process. It can further add a small contribution in the debate

of identity understanding by taking a line of constructivism with a theoretical depart from the primordial orientation towards identity. Moreover, this paper can also penetrate at the policy level by engaging itself in the ongoing debate of identity politics in Nepal by providing constructionist model of identity understanding, an alternative to primordial understanding of identity.

Following the research gap, this paper contributes to study on Tarai Muslim in the changing context. The research question of the paper is based on the study of fluidity in Muslim identity living in Tarai region of Nepal. This adopts the analysis of identity within changing macro structure over time period. The research question is categorized into two sections. The general section and specific section will be,

#### General Research Question

- How do individuals' experiences of self-identity as a Muslim change across their lives?

#### Specific Research Questions

- In what ways, the impact of nation-states, and modern education have brought a shift in Muslim identity and what are substantive changes in an individual due to the shift identity?
- How does travel, urbanization, international migration, and relations with India and other Islamic countries have influenced to bring the shift in Muslim identity, and what are changes in individual's life due to shift in identity?

### **1.3 Objective**

The objectives of the research study are:

- To explain how the indentity of an individual changes with changing of context over time
- To trace the process involved to change Muslim identity due to influence of nation-states, modern education, urbanization, international migration, and relations with India and other Islamic countries

- To uncover the substantive changes in individuals due to changes resulting from the shift in identity

#### **1.4 Importance of Study**

This empirical research invites for conceptual debate in understanding the meaning of ethnicity and identity. It opens the floor of discussion on whether the ‘primordial’ or ‘constructivist’ perspectives on ethnicity are more significant while dealing with identity and ethnicity at the empirical level. Following the constructivist view of identity, that is, identity as a construct within social and historical contexts, this paper can be an effort to illuminate and substantiate the fluid and changing characteristics of identity. From the academic lens, this paper can also contribute to amplifying the knowledge in the sociological domains like social processes and social change. This research study, by adopting the constructivist line, critically accesses the identity construction by its implication of the theory of ‘Sociological Imagination’ provided by Mills (2000), where he suggests the inquiry of the social world through the interaction of the individual and society, biography and history, and self and world.

In the recent global system of the capitalist world economy, it has become essential to stress the nation-state and its role in identity constructions. As noted by Anderson (1983), “there is formal universality of nationality as a socio-cultural concept—in the modern world everyone can, should, will have a nationality as he or she has a gender. . .” (p. 5). In a similar fashion, Nairn (1977) argues, “Nationalism is the pathology of modern developmental history, as inescapable as “neurosis” in the individual. . .” ( p.359). However, the nation-state cannot be treated as a free and autonomous entity in this integrated system of world economy as marked by Immanuel Wallerstein. The state's position in the world economy also becomes a subject matter of investigation that eventually shapes individual or group subjectivities or identities. Therefore, the research inquiry of identity construction gives equal importance to the role of local, national, and global processes.

In the context of Nepal, this research gets critically engaged in political debates ongoing on identity politics and inclusion-exclusion. The governmental policies and other prevailing constitutional provisions granting positive discrimination to excluded identities have been seen

to have adopted a primordial framing of identity. This research arises questions for the approach of the contemporary political attempts in Nepal. It exposes the problems inherited with a primordial view and further suggests the broader understanding of identity and ethnicity in wider social and historical nexus as a necessary component. Similarly, the next issue where the ethnic activists and their demand of compensation for 240 years of historic wrong from the old Brahmanic-Hindu-monarchical centralized Nepali state is also disputable as the state itself undergoes several changes in its long track of the history of nation-state due to its internal as well as changes in world systemic structures. Also, this study can illustrate how such political culture prioritizing local and national ingredients fails to link identity formation beyond the nation-state. Moreover, this study seeks to resolve the political debate about placing Tarai Muslims as a religious group or Madhesi.

### **1.5 From Research Problem to Theory**

The working on research problem mainly aimed to trace the changes in Muslims in the longer run due to the larger structure. It has attempted to show how Muslim identity is in continuous flux due to changes in context. The changes in identity are examined due to the interplay of identity within the space-time continuum focusing on local, national, and global contexts. In a way, this research has attempted to reaffirm a theoretical idea of historical-structural fluidity in identity. The resolution of the research problem is the contribution to supplement a constructionist theory by searching a nexus of identity molding with a series of ongoing factors linked in a larger social structure. At its core, it has picked major transformations in the world's systemic process—the impact of modern education, democratization, globalization, migration, and the influence of nation-state—to show the changes in identity that can finally reject essentialist and primordial claims of identity.

### **1.6 Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical context of my research study is based on the claim that ethnicity (identity) is contingent upon the historical and social circumstances in which it develops, and it is not enduring but constantly changing (Mishra & Gurung, 2012). Barth's orientation of linking

identity with social process and constructivism also supports building a theoretical framework for my research. Barth's work on constructivism is based on a claim, "ethnicity is the product of a social process rather than a cultural given, made and remade rather than taken for granted, chosen depending on circumstances rather than ascribed through birth" (Wimmer, 2008, p. 971). Similarly, the line adopted by Chai (1996) also helped build the theoretical frame for my research studies. Chai (1996) argued that identity and its boundary are based upon ascriptive criteria or essentialist criteria from homeland communities at particular places and points in time; however, the creation of ethnic identities is determined by migration at population centers ongoing through modernizing structural changes such as industrialization, commercialization, bureaucratization and expansion of education.

This theoretical context varies from other contrasting theories of identity like—primordialist, modernist and instrumentalist. For primordialists, identity (ethnic or national) is assumed to have persisted over long periods of time and to have generated deep emotional attachment in an unproblematic manner. Also, this line of interpretation of identity often lies in essentialist orientation (Gellner et al., 1996). Primordialism is based on the claim that identity is fixed, unchanging, and essential character which finds its root in biology and descent (Mishra, 2011; Norval, 2004). Likewise, primordialism ignores the complexity of historical conditioning of identity and it over-stresses the internal homogeneity of identities (Norval, 2004, p.271). To opposition of primordialist school of thought, there is alternative line as modernist or instrumentalist. The terms 'instrumentalist' and 'modernist' differ in the context of their use and their implications. The claim of identity for instrumentalists is like an instrument that is linked to gaining a political or economic advantage (Gellner et al., 1996). Instrumentalism is nominalist which is based on more material phenomena (Norval, 2004, p. 271). However, for modernists, the nation's claim is considered a modern phenomenon, not predating the eighteenth century (Gellner et al., 1996, p.7).

**Chapter Two**  
**Identity Debate and Muslims of Tarai Nepal:**  
**Literature Review**

**2.1 Macro Social Structure and Historical Context: Constructionist view of Identity**

The constructionist view claims that the origin, content, and form of ethnicity or identity is continuously negotiated, revised and revitalized both by ethnic group members as well as by outside observer (Nagel, 1994, p.153). Barth's (1998) provided interactional approach to study ethnicity as a part of a dynamic social process. The Barth's concept of 'ethnic boundary' offers significant insights to discuss on how ethnic distinctions are made and ethnic boundaries are erected. The work of Barth is intended to focusing on different processes that seemed to be involved in generating and maintaining ethnic groups. Such orientation of constructivism departs itself from the primordialist's claim on ethnicity which marks ethnicity as largely biologically self-perpetuating due to fixed, unchanging and essential character of ethnicity (Mishra, 2011, p.1).

By adopting the line of constructionism perspective to explain ethnicity, Mishra and Gurung (2012) note,

. . . The constructionist view, in very broad terms, views individual and group subjectivity as being formed or influenced by historical, economic, political, cultural, and social contexts. As these context change, so do individual or group subjectivities, identities or ethnicities. Ethnicity, or ethnic boundaries are, therefore, not immutable, but historically changeable and socially negotiable, fluid phenomena. Ethnicities emerge and subside; they merge and splinter; they (or certain features of them) are highlighted or hidden in different relational contexts for particular purposes. (pp.2-3)

Following the line of constructivism, Fisher (2011) further argued that constructions of ethnicity is simultaneously new and retrogressive, that is, ethnicity is plastic with its characteristics a traditional, flexible, and malleable and fluid. Gellner (2012) presented contemporary anthropological ideas about ethnicity by correlating it with fluidity, hybridity and performativity. He asserts "people have moved from one niche to another, one set of allegiances to another, over time, and have thereby changed the kind of people that they are" (p.93).

In analyzing the making of ethnicity, Mishra (2011) insists that the fortification or heightening of the ethnic wall and a sharpening of ethnic distinctiveness and ethnic boundary rests on historical and structural conditions and (agency) action, that is, the study of ethnicity requires the context-specific and situated analysis which avoids the trap of determinism (p.3). Further, he writes:

Because ethnicity is a social and historical product, there is no fixity or permanence to it. There is no fixity to ethnic differences and boundaries either. All social and historical products undergo change. Ethnicity is also fluid, in-the-making, human endeavor. It does not ever get 'completed' nor, it appears, can it be left unstarted... An ethnic group exists not on its own and with a specific set of features. An ethnic self exists only in reference to an ethnic other. Ethnic-hood develops as part and parcel of a social relationship with other. (Mishra, 2011, pp.28-29)

There are several empirical studies in Nepal that demonstrate constructivist construction of ethnicity. Gubhaju (1999) from her study of the case of Nepali and Newar identity in the United States argued that the concept of ethnicity changed depending on the situation and context as it is the people in the society who define the boundaries of ethnicity. She further adds that ethnicity, as a cultural construct, is an ambiguous concept which involves language, religion, caste, nationality, and other elements of identity. Similarly, Guneratne also makes a compelling argument in his study of making of Tharu identity where he finds that the basis of identity are shared symbols and meanings (such as religion or language or social structure) coming out of social and historical processes, which is therefore neither primordialist nor modernist (Guneratne, 2002, p.3). In his writing, "Reification and Plasticity in Nepalese Ethnicity," Fisher (2011) shows the plasticity in ethnicity by giving several examples which includes the variation within Sherpas, Magarant, Takhali, and Tharus of Nepal. In a similar fashion, Mishra (2011) also commented on the fluidity of ethnicity in a statement that the purported Limbu-hood of grandfather and grandson is different due to the differences in the time of social structure that purports ethnicity.

The constructionists open the grounds for historical analysis of macro socio-structures in the processing of ethnic identity. This inquires the account of longer historical diagnosis within larger socio-structural context. In the contemporary period, the role of nation-state is taken to be crucial in shaping of identity however, there also requires a global insight of causes that are

shaping nation-state itself and thus the identity construction. Speaking on the role of nation-state, Brubaker (1999) elucidates that state-framed nationalism shapes the national identity on the basis of culture and ethnicity propagated by the state. Brubaker notes,

...the model of the state-framed nationhood or nationalism enables us to talk about the way in which the linguistic, cultural, and even (narrowly) ethnic aspects of nationhood and nationalism may be framed, mediated, and shaped by the State... The culture that is understood to be constitutive of nationhood is pervasively state-framed, and in modern times, state propagated culture; it is not conceived as prior to and independent of the territorial and institutional frame of the State (Brubaker,1999, p.98, cited in Malagodi, 2013, p.31).

In the work, “The Subject and Power,” Foucault (1982) has also discussed how power subjugates an individual, that is, unconsciously objectification of human beings. The modern type of subject created by the state is not free and autonomous. Rather, the state deliberately and continuously builds narratives that control an individual's subjectivity. Similarly, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) defines state as meta-field which is shaping the habitus of a person. Habermas also admitted that modern life-world is not free and the communication is distorted due to power and money. Furthermore, the critical theory of Habermas suggests, ‘there is decline of freedom with the expansion of capitalism and the bureaucratized state; and the seeming power of the state to construct and control social life’ (Turner, 1987, p.191).

In the Nepali context, the historical tracing of legal codes shows that the state directly has been involved in the freezing and unfreezing of identical categories in different periods. The two contrasting cases are: the one where the identities were forcefully constructed and frozen was in 1854 civil code while in another 1963 civil code, many caste and ethnic identities were unfrozen (Mishra, 2011, p.19). Similarly, there also followed Maoist insurgency demanding provinces based on ethnic claim, democratic movements and ethnic movements against power regime that leads to redefining of Nepali state leaving playing space for identity reconstruction. In his work, Gurung (2012) mainly focused on national context and asserted that the invocation of the identity in Nepal is outcome of unequal power relations between state and society, particularly historical injustice, political marginalization, social deprivation and cultural genocide of Nepal's indigenous people (p.193). In a similar fashion, the legitimacy of ethnicist politics is also nationally limited and based on the narrative of revenge for ‘loss of ethnic land and self-rule for 240 years’— a reference to the unification of Nepal under the Shah monarchy,

and to Hindu religion and the Brahmin and Chhetri caste group (Mishra, 2011, p.7).

The state-centric explanation of construction of identity is inadequate in the modern world of capitalism and globalization. Mishra (2011), while discussing the ethnic upsurge in Nepal, critiques the exclusive explanation of ethnicity, referring to it as an internal process in Nepal. He asks to visualize the world-systemic processes as an acting force where the nation-state is not a whole in itself or an autonomous entity. Moreover, he writes, “societies and social processes, however, are no longer nationally constituted, if they ever were. The ‘sovereign’ nation-states are not nationally constituted either” (p.15). Wallerstein (2004) argued that the modern world-system as a capitalist world-economy which comprises a collection of many institutions, the combination of which accounts for its processes, and all of which are intertwined with each other. He listed basic institutions as the markets; the firms that compete in the markets; the multiple states within an interstate system; the households; the classes; and the status groups or identities (p.24). In this regard, Mishra further argued that at this age of globalization, globalization impinges on all kinds and levels of social structures and processes in a way that global influences local and also the global is constructed in the dialectics with the local (p.15). In the similar fashion, the arguments of Friedman (1999) link the process of ethnic fragmentation with a global phenomenon (p.408). Kuper (2003) also makes the point even more starkly by correlating the indigenous movement with the UN and the World Bank and by international development agencies and NGOs (p. 389). In the process of contextualizing the debate in the wider sphere of world system, the authors like Gellner (2012) and Mishra (2011) argued that identity politics or discourse of indigeneity in Nepal have a socio-historical context beyond a national boundary. Gellner (2012) notes:

. . .The ideas and discourses of indigeneity have a considerable history. In Nepal they be dated fairly precisely to 1993 when the UN’s declaration of a Year of Indigenous People (which later became a Decade and then a second Decade) forced local Janjati intellectuals to reframe what they were claiming in terms not just ‘ethnicity’ or ‘nationality’ but more specifically in terms of indigeneity. In so far as Nepali politicians and intellectuals fail to distinguish between ethnicity and indigeneity, they have not grasped what is new and distinctive about the claims currently being advanced and why there is global push for such rights. (p.92)

In the critical assessment of the construction of identity and its boundary, Chai (1996), in his article “A Theory of Ethnic Group Boundaries,” offered a theory emphasizing the process

analysis for the creation of ethnic boundaries. He argued that the boundary location of ethnic group is based upon ascriptive criteria or essentialist criteria from ethnic homeland communities at particular place and points in time however, the creation of ethnic identities is determined by migration at population centers ongoing through modernizing structural changes such as industrialization, commercialization, bureaucratization and expansion of education (pp. 286- 288). Following the line Chai, Mishra also connects the ethnic upsurge with ongoing changes in Nepal followed by increasing hegemony of a globe on a peripheral and dependent state (like Nepal). He pointed that the changes after 1950s has been remarkable under which more and more literate and educated youths move off the family farm and away from the rural and the agricultural and to the urban and the non-agricultural. Therefore, Mishra connects ethnic upsurge more to a search for a new and scarce source of livelihood which has less to do with identity (Mishra, 2011, p.1). In a way, Mishra is inviting for broader analysis of identity politics and ethnic debate in the context of the transition of Nepalese society from pre-capitalist structure like prestige, caste, ascribed status, and bonded labor with self-sustained agricultural society to penetration of capitalism with spike in foreign aid, urbanization, international migration, cash derived market economy with free labor. In a similar way, Luintel (2018) also mentioned about Nepal's experiencing of tremendous political, social, and economic changes since the 1950s.

In my research, I will put the identity within larger macro-structure in the time flow to examine the fluidity in the identity. The theoretical frame to be adopted in studying identity as fluid is developed from Barth's orientation of linking identity with social processes and constructivism. This will claim that identity is fluid as it is contingent upon the historical and social circumstances. While studying a flow of identity in the life histories of Muslim participants, I will link identity interaction with several factors coming out of social and historical processes. The research will be an attempt to show how the nation-state has been influencing the identities through legal, constitutional or other state's policies. In this modern world of globalization, there will be further inquiry of how the identity shaping social processes are acting beyond the sphere of nation-state. This includes the scrutiny of the influence of social media, urbanization, relationship with India, identity politics, migration, expansion of modern education, occupational shift from agriculture to non-agriculture etc. on life flow of identity.

## 2.2 The Muslims of Nepal: A Brief Overview

In Nepal, Muslims, as follower of Islam religion, comprise 5.09 % of total population of Nepal (Census, 2021). The socio-political status of Muslims in Nepal is broadly a disadvantaged minority (Seddon, 2017; Sijapati, 2012:17). The poor and disadvantaged position of Muslims is further clarified by Nepal Human Development Report, 2014, the HDI values were poorest in the Tarai for *Dalits* (0.400), with Muslims next poorest (0.422) which is still lower than that of hill *Dalits* (NHDR, 2014). Overall, in Nepal, the adult literacy of Muslims is lower (43.56%) than that of adult literacy in Nepal (59.57%), as suggested in NHDR 2014. Similarly, while accessing the variation in literacy among Tarai/Madheshi group, Subedi and Gautam (2016) presented that Tarai Dalits have the lowest adult literacy rate (23.1%), followed by the Muslims (35.4%), Tarai janjati (54.1%) and the Other Tarai/Madhesh Castes (45%) while the adult literacy rate among Tarai Brahmin/Chhetri is 80 percent, a fairly higher rate than the national average (59.6 %) (NSII, 2014, cited in Subedi & Gautam, 2016, p.5). The political representation of Muslims in national assemblies is noted down in Seddon (2017) work which recorded 2.45 percent in 1991, 0.50 percent in 1994, 0.99 percent in 1999, 1.22 percent in 2006 election, and 2.83 percent in 2008 election. The total number of Muslims represented in the national assembly is always lower than 4.4 percent of the overall population, although the proportional election system was adopted for the first time in the history of Nepal in 2008 (p.177).

The Muslims of Nepal are heterogeneous and are divided along caste, class, linguistic, and geographical lines as well as *maktabi fikr* (school of thought). The Muslims in Nepal share few commonalities with each other except common caste/ethnic and religious affiliation. The Nepali Muslims, in the terms of sectarian division, belongs to Sunni sect with a small minority from the Shia sect. There is also three main *maktabi fikr* among Sunnis: Deobandi, Barelwi, and Ahl-e-Hadis. Similarly, Muslims of Nepal are distinct in terms of ‘caste hierarchy’, or the *ashraf-ajlaf* dichotomy (Sijapati, 2012, pp.18-19). In this category, *ashrafs* were considered to be descendants of distinguished foreign ancestors and hence of a superior caste group while *ajlaf* castes, descendants of local converters (i.e., people who converted to Islam from Hinduism). It is generally believed that *ajlafs* are accorded a lower status because these castes converted to Islam in the hope of improving their status and not ‘through the sword.’ There are four sub-

categories of *Ashrafs*— the *Sayyads*; *the Sheikhs*; the Mughals; and the *Pathans*—and they are considered to constitute approximately 45 percent of Nepal’s Muslim population. In contrast, the *ajlaf*s are local occupational groups like *ansari* (weavers), *sabji farosh* (vegetable sellers), *dhobi* (washermen), *naddaf* (cotton teasers carders), *dofalli* (tassel and bangle sellers), *mocchi* (cobblers), *darzi* (tailors), *hajam* (barbers) etc., who are placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy (Seddon, 2017, p.88).

There is no religious or ideological principle in Islam providing the foundation for the concept of caste however, Muslim group are endogamous and there is presence of hierarchy (Seddon, 2017, p. 90). Despite prevalence of caste practice, caste relations among Muslims are not rigid as they are among Hindus (Sijapati, 2012, p.19). At the empirical level, mostly the inter-caste restrictions are confined to matrimonial matters and are less practiced in terms of commensality and other forms of social interactions (Blustain, 1997; Dastider, 2007; Seddon, 2017). In the context of Nepal, geographical/regional divisions seem to be the predominant feature that differentiate the various groups of Muslims to the extent that regional differences have a bearing on caste, sectarian, and class divisions (Sijapati, 2012, pp.18-19). The classification of Muslims based on geographical locations and arrival history are divided into six main groups: Kathmandu Muslims, hill Muslims, Kashmiri Muslims of Kathmandu, Hindustani Muslims, Tibetan Muslims in Kathmandu, and Tarai Muslims (Seddon, 2017; Upadhyay, 2014; Sijapati, 2011; Sijapati, 2012).

### **Tarai Muslims**

The Tarai Muslims comprises about 97 percent of total Muslims of Nepal (Seddon, 2017, p.56). The Muslims of Tarai mainly speak languages like— Maithali, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, and Bajjika – as they have adopted the local language of ethnic/indigenous population affiliated to belonging particular area and they also possess the marital ties with Indian Muslims (Seddon, 2017). Similarly, the culture of Tarai Muslim as the languages, food habits, dressing style, forms of entertainment— is very closer to *Madhesi* culture. The historical sketch for migration and settlement of Tarai Muslims is not fairly clear however, it is assumed before the 17<sup>th</sup> century, going back to the time of Mughals (Seddon, 2017, p.57). Similarly, Upadhyay (2014) suggests that after the Anglo-Nepal war of 1814, when the boundaries of southern Nepal and India were

clearly marked, a large part of area present day Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, inhabited by a significant Muslim population, become the territory of Nepal and through this process a significant Muslims incorporated in Nepal (p.30).

### **Hill Muslims**

Similarly, the ancestor of hill Muslims are widely identified as ‘Charaute’ or ‘Miya,’ who are said to be traditionally scent manufacturers, musicians and suppliers of bangles (*chura*) etc. were and they were apparently settled early in Nepal, coming from different parts of northern India during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. They are invited by the rulers of the Chaubise petty states in the western hills. The Muslims were called to assist the rising petty state of Gorkha, who wanted Muslim artisans and artillerymen to make firearms (Seddon 2017, p.44). There is a small number of these hill Muslims in Nepal’s central and western hill districts of Tanahu, Gorkha, Kaski, Syagnja, Palpa, Argakhanchi, Pyuthan and Dailekh. They also speak hill ethnic languages, local dialectics, Nepali language or a mixed language of Urdu and Nepali, Churoute or Miya Bhasa (Upadhyay, 2014; Seddon, 2017).

### **Muslims of Kathmandu Valley**

The Muslims of Kathmandu valley are highly diverse and divided into: Kashmiri Muslims, Hindustani or Nepali Muslims, and a small population of Tibetan Muslims. The ‘Kashmiri Muslims’ delivers different senses as: those who are Kashmiri by descent, those who are Kashmiri by geographical origin and those who are Kashmiri by religious affiliation. The Kashmiri Muslims arrived from Kashmir in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of King Rama Malla (1484-1520 CE). They were invited to serve their court and they built Kashmiri Masjid, only few hundred meters from the king’s palace. Similarly, the Hindustani or Nepali Muslims are the descendants of the Mughals who settled in Nepal for trade during the time of Mallas (12<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century). This also includes the immigrants from Lucknow related to the Begum Hazrat Mahal of Lucknow; the former concubine and wife of the Nawab of Oudh (Ayodha) who fled from India after the “Great Mutiny” of 1857 in which she had supported the rebels against British. She along many entourages settled as refugee in western Tarai and then in Kathmandu. The present-day Nepali Jame Masjid was built by Hindustani Muslims and is the main Mosque for Muslims in Kathmandu (Seddon, 2017; Sijapati, 2012).

In the same way, the Tibetan Muslims in Kathmandu offered a new dimension to Muslim plurality and cultural and linguistic diversity (Sijapati, 2012, p.21). ‘Tibetan Muslims’ came relatively recently in 1952, after China took over Tibet and declared it Chinese (Seddon, 2017, p.51).

In the research study, I am intended to carry the field research for primary data by focusing Tarai Muslims. The higher concentration of Muslim in Tarai region of Nepal is one of the reasons why I have focused my study among Tarai Muslim. Similarly, the geopolitical positioning of Tarai region of Nepal due to its open border with India, will also provide a room to examine the impact of identity in Tarai Muslim, mainly after easy access of transportation and communication. In the same way, the ethnic movement/Madhesh moment carried in Tarai with higher influence of identity politics will also provide the area of study about how these movement has impacted over Muslim identity living in Tarai. In addition, my own belonging to this region with observation of decades has allowed me to study the changing of identity in the context with increasing influence of international migration and modern education within entire nation state. This helps to trace how the ongoing process contributing in identity shaping of Tarai Muslim.

### **The Legal and Political Landscape of Muslims of Nepal**

The ‘Muluki Ain’ of 1854 was the first legal code into which Muslims, like all other social groups, were integrated by formal and official classification. Malagodi (2013) argues that the 1854 legal code was influenced by two distinct ideas. Firstly, the South Asian concept of ‘a pure Hindu country’ - the *asal* Hindusthan Prithvi Narayan Shah had talked about in his *Divya Upades* - where everyone has a designated place in a Dharmik order and collective purity is safeguarded by law. Secondly, the Western idea of a nation-state (p.79). The Muslims were considered as *mlekshya* (*mleccha*) or foreigners; and given an inferior and impure status in the caste hierarchy of Brahmin, Kshetriya, Baishiya, and Sudra. Seddon (2017) mentioned that the ‘Muluki Ain’ offers an interesting recognition with two different types of classifications of Muslims (p.87). The first classification involves the categorization in terms of touchability and untouchability, where Muslims were placed into “Paani Na Chalne Choichhito Haalne Naparne” (impure but touchable castes). In the second type of classification, Muslims followed

categorization into native Muslims (ajlaf or Nepal ka Musalman), and foreign Muslims (ashraf or pardesi Musalman) (Hofer 1979, p.13).

After almost a century-long practice of Muluki Ain of 1954, a new Muluki Ain was 1963 came into exercise. Upadhyay (2014) writes, “the late king Mahendra replaced the 1853 old legal Code with a comparatively more modern new Code in 1963, which provided equal citizenship status to the Muslims” (p. 33). For the first time, ‘the right to religion’ had been constitutionally recognized but still conversion to another religion was a punishable offence. There was clear statement in the 1959 and 1962 Constitutions that King needed to be a Hindu and Nepal as a Hindu citizen. The institutions like Millat-e-Islamia, the Muslim Sewa Samiti, and the Islamic Sangh Nepal were established in the era of 1970s and 1980s in order to promote Islamic social values and practices and conducting social works among Muslims of Nepal. However, the party-less Panchayati<sup>1</sup> system suppressed the politics of ethnicity or religion as a part of the effort to consolidate the national identity and unity. Upadhyay (2014) mentioned,

The Panchayati slogan *ekdesh, ekbhesh, ekbhasa* (one country, one dress and one language) proved perilous to Tarai people and to many ethnic and religious minority groups. The slogan one dress, one language tried to design a new united Nepali identity with a common dress *Daura-Suruwal-Dhaka Topi* (Nepali trouser and Nepali cap) and one language (Nepali language) excluding all others, but failed despicably to give equal caste/ethnic/region/region-based egalitarianism to all Nepali masses. (pp 9-10)

The constitution of 1990 and the multipartyism era was relatively progressive for the minorities. Although it was based in the ideas of Nepal as a Hindu monarchy, the constitution provided significant clauses relating to religious minorities with provision to treat all its citizen equally with phrase ‘all citizens will be free to profess and practice religion’ (Malagodi, 2013).

The beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century is taken as vibrant era in terms of ‘inclusion.’ The social groups like women, *dalits*, *masdthesis*, and *adivasijanjanjatis* had been clearly identified and were claiming identity group of special attention and support for socio-political inclusion. However, Muslims as a religious minority remained unrecognized and ignored by the ‘social inclusion’

---

Panchayati<sup>1</sup> era is the partyless political system started from 1960 with direct leadership of the king Mahendra.

projects of the donors and, increasingly of the government (Seddon, 2017). The Maoist insurgency between 1996 and 2006 further promoted the education and political advancement of Muslims since Maoist challenged the established system by highlighting various inequalities produced by unitary Monarchy regime (Seddon, 2017).

Upadhyay (2014) argued that after the People's Movement in 2006 and Nepal's new set-up for the secular republic in 2008, the marginalized community seemed to come increasingly to the forefront. In the meanwhile, there were protests in the Tarai under the banner of 'Madhesis.' The political activists highlighted the rights of Madhesis as a whole, but Muslims (and also Tharus) were objected to accepting the banner of the Hindu-dominated majority of Madhesis (Seddon, 2017).

Similarly, the Interim Constitution of 2007 for the first time placed the provision of incorporating and uplifting the marginalized communities (women, *dalits*, *janjatis*, people from remote regions, *madhesis*, and 'others') through mechanism of quotas under inclusive policy. However, Muslims were not explicitly recognized as a minority group rather they incorporated under 'others' and thus there is no provision as a separate category for Muslims. Also, the current Constitution of Nepal: 2015 has incorporated the provision of Muslim Commission to ensure the overall process of inclusion in article 264.

### **2.3 Empirical Context**

The empirical context reflects the changes in the socio-political context of Nepal, mainly after 1950. There has been a growing impact of democratization, globalization, capitalism, literacy, contact and information, urbanization, and migration. A decade-long Maoist insurgency and armed revolution following the Peoples Movement of 2006 have also contributed to considerable changes in Nepal by transforming it from a unitary, culturally defined, monolithic Hindu Kingdom to a secular republic federal democratic state. Furthermore, for the first time, a commission of national inclusion, a commission of indigenous nationalities, a commission of Muslims, and the Commission of Tharu are made under the constitution of Nepal 2015. There has been recognition of diverse identities with a record of 126 caste and ethnic groups, 123 languages, and different religious groups (like Hindu, Buddhism, Islam, Kirat, Christian, Jain,

Sikh, and others) in Nepal (CBS, 2011). Similarly, the preamble of the Constitution of Nepal, 2015 promises to end all forms of discrimination created by an older centralized and unitary system of governance, and it ensures the embrace of multi-caste, multi-lingual, multi-cultural, and diverse geographical specificities.

In a similar fashion, the empirical context signifies the discourse on the theme of social exclusion and inclusion within the political parties, Nepal Government, international aid agencies, and the wider public when it is used by Nepal Government in its Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) or the Tenth Plan (2002-2007). Later on, the notions of ‘social exclusion’ and ‘social inclusion’ got wider attention in public discourse, demanding fair and equitable representation and participation at all levels, access and control over resources, empowerment, and ensuring rights of all excluded groups or communities such as women, Dalits, Madhesi, indigenous people, and linguistic and religious minorities (Bhattachan, 2009, p. 1).

The empirical context is one in which there is rise of ethnic upsurge and identity politics in Nepal. During this period (1951-2011), there have been fortification of ethnic boundaries followed by ethnic upsurge demanding ethnically-based provinces in Nepal. This also followed several ethnic movements like Madhesi movements carrying with slogans like ‘*Ek Madesh, Ek Pardesh*’ (entire Tarai as one province). The model of ethnic based province is not applied however ethnicity and identity have been penetrated in the political spectrum of Nepali politics. The naming of one of the provinces out of seven as *Madhesh pardesh* (based on ethnicity) and the failure of giving any name to province no. 1 till the date— also indicate the ongoing struggle of ethnic politics in the country. Similarly, the nature of different newly emerged political parties like *Nagrik Unmukti Parti*, *Janta Samajbadi Party*, *Loktantrik Samajwadi Party*, and *Janamat Party*—have also picked the issues like identity, ethnicity, indigeneity, inclusion-exclusion as major theme while contesting election.

In the same way, the empirical context is one in which the divide in between two contrasting ethnic identities came into surface—madhesis and *pahadis*. In the banner of Madhesi, there had been coalescing of heterogenous categories against *pahadis* during Madhesi Movements. At present context, in contrast, there has been scenario of splintering of ethnic groups. There

is running disputes where many ethnic categories are feeling uncomfortable to share a title of broader ethnic category. The current debate whether to fit Tarai Muslims in the religious category of Madhesi is also debatable. In ongoing provision of reservation, Tarai Muslims shares Madhesi category however there is an alternate demand to remove Muslims from Madhesi category. The contrasting argument against madhesization of Muslims is based on the claim that it is unfair to put Muslims inside Madhesi umbrella as Muslims live not only in Tarai but also in hills and mountains.

## **2.4 Research Gap**

In regards to the status of literature available for the Muslims of Nepal, it can be noticed that there is a fewer research studies targeting the Muslims. While tracing the geographical coverage, the studies concentrating in the Hill region of Nepal is higher in comparative to Tarai belt of Nepal. The concentration of Muslims is higher in the Tarai region of Nepal, than other geographical landscape (Seddon, 2017; Sijapati, 2011; Upadhyay, 2014). In this regard as well, the studies of Tarai Muslims are the neglected aspect from the academic records.

In the available literatures, the authors have accepted the heterogeneity. Based on arrival history and geographical location, the work of Seddon (2017), Sijapati (2011), and Upadhyay (2014) classified Muslims of Nepal as Tarai Muslims, Hill Muslims, Kashmiri Muslims, Tibetan Muslims, and Kathmandu Muslims. However, the majority of studies do not explicitly cover the existing differences within Muslims while carrying out the research work. In this area, the study becomes too generic, and the heterogeneity within Muslims gets neglected. The attempt of Upadhyay (2014), however, has tried to become more specific to the differences within Muslims and it has focused on Hill Muslims.

Similarly, the pieces of literature on Muslims, in many ways, have also failed to carry study with changing time and context. There are rapid changes in the Tarai region of Nepal after the 1950s, which can be highlighted in the work of many authors (Luintel, 2018; Mishra, 2011). The kinds of literature mentioned the inclining graph of literacy, access to transportation, social media, and nation-state as well as global influence. In these changing contexts, the literature capturing the relationship between changing context and the status of Muslims is minimal. The

work of Sijapti (2011) has tried to link the changing sketch of Muslims with the evolving political landscape. The author has reflected on the changes in the positioning of Muslims in a changing political context by comparing Muslims in the Hindu Kingdom and a new secular Nepal. This work of the author failed to relate the changes in Muslims to other structural changes introduced by growing access to education, transportation, or other factors.

Moreover, some pieces of literature applied constructivist lines to study identity. The literature mainly focuses on exploring the identity construction of different ethnic groups in Nepal. Fisher's work (2011) shows the plasticity of ethnicity, with a prime focus on ethnic groups like Sherpas, Magarant, Takhali, and Tharus. Gubhaju (1999) also considered Newar's identity from Nepal, who is residing in the United States, to show how ethnic identity changes with time and context. Similarly, Guneratne (2002), while studying Tharu's identity, rejects the primordial nor modernist claim of identity, and he concluded identity is a social and historical product. There is a lack of study of the identity of Muslims of Nepal from the constructivist line.

At the empirical level, the debates on identity of Muslims and Madhesi, also found to project the identity of Muslims or Madhesi as a homogeneous group. This mechanism of adopting primordial orientation in identity debates has also mislead the entire construction of Muslims in changing social structure over time. This political practice has failed to answer the logic behind the debate of placing Muslims as a religious group or Madhesi. The primordial line of orientation is unable to answer the reason why Tarai Muslims actively participated in Madhesh movement. In this scenario, the entire political practice ignores the constructionist line of identity-making. This ongoing political practice has ignored the social constitution of identity in the changing times context.

Therefore, there is a vacuum of literature that has deeply studied the identity construction of Muslims following the larger structural change in the longer historical time period. This research study attempts to provide small input into the above research gap. The research work, after applying the constructivist line, attempts to relate identity with the social-historical process and it incorporates changes in identity with changes in macro social structure with time pace. This research studies acknowledges the heterogeneity within Muslims and focus its

attention over Tarai Muslims. The work can bridge the gap by linking Tarai Muslim identity play due to an influence of macro structures like nation-state, modern education, travel, urbanization, international migration, and Nepal's relations with India and other Islamic countries.

## **2.5 Conceptual Framework**

Figure 1 is the conceptual frame of the research study carried out.

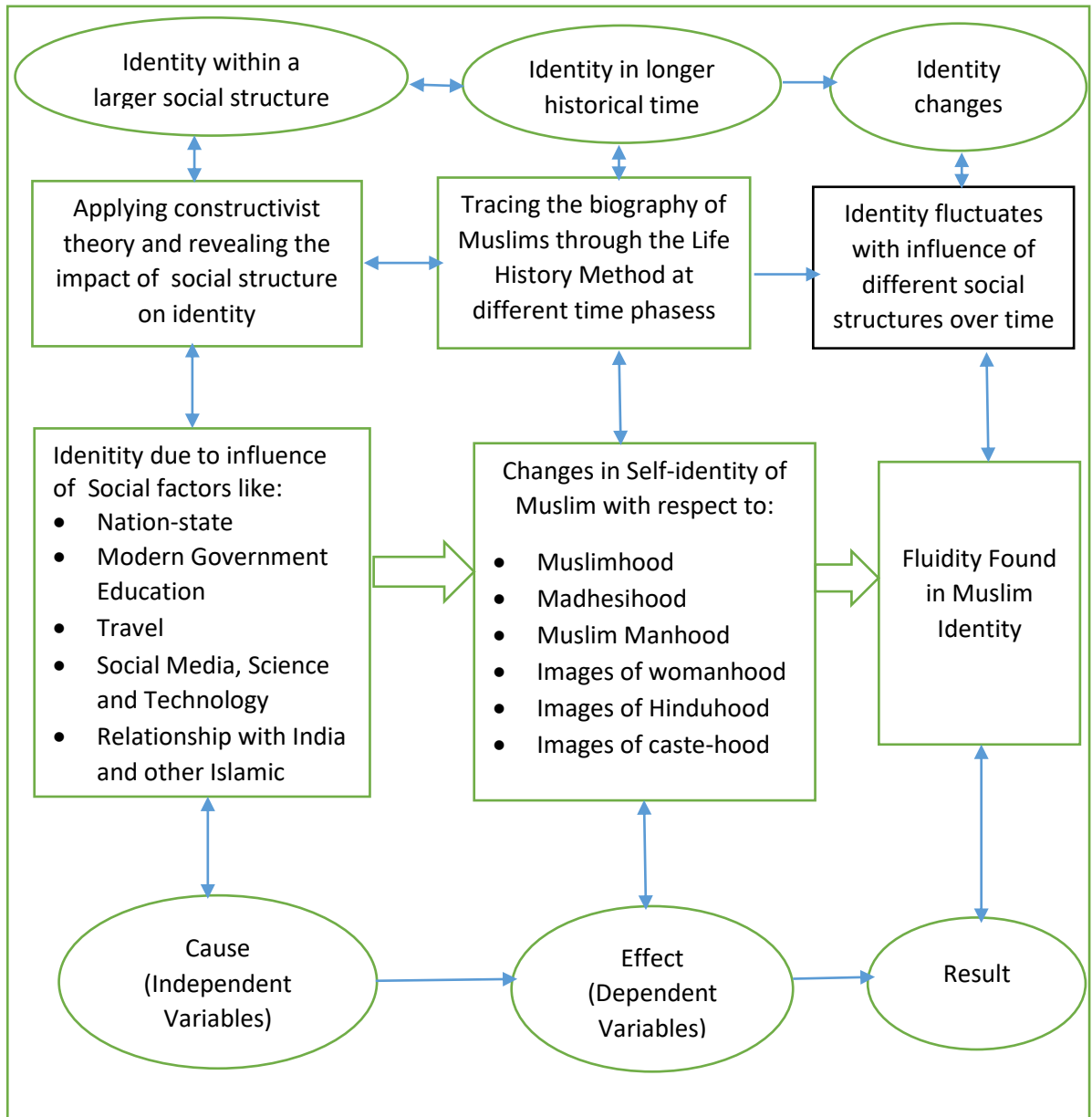


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

In order to show identity in constructionist line, the identity is juxtaposed in larger social structure and longer historical run. This means that the relationship of identity is examined with changing structure and time to show how identity is dependent on various social structures that fluctuates with time. In my research, the independent variables that becomes cause of changes in identity are different macro social factors like nation-state; modern government education; travel; social media, science and technology; relationship with India and other

Islamic states. The changes in the identity is the effect which brings changes in different dimensions of identity. The different dimensions of identity which act as effect are self identity with respect to Muslimhood, Muslim manhood, images of Muslim womanhood, Images of hinduhood, images of caste-hood.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Research Methodology**

In order to give a clear insight into the research methodology, I have discussed the following topics—the nature of research, field, research design, data collection methods, and data analysis process—in different sections. The first section will focus on the nature of research, which provides a detailed idea about the nature of data. Similarly, in the second section, there is a discussion on where the required data can be found. This section addresses the query about the field and the justification for field selection. In the third section, there is an inquiry about research design focusing on the information about the universe, population and sample, and unit of analysis to be studied. The fourth section will discuss how the data can be collected from the field. This concentrates on the discussion of the appropriate method for data collection. Finally, in the fifth section, there is a discussion on how the data collected from the field can be analyzed.

#### **3.1 Nature of Research**

My research is qualitative in nature due to its adaptation of a philosophical foundation. In the research study, the primary objective is to show how the identity is fluid by juxtaposing it into a larger structure and longer run. Therefore, the adopted research paradigm of my research is based on the assumption of constructivism. This means that it relies in the principle of relativism, that is, local and specific constructed nature of social realities. The research study collects data based on the life story method, where the narrative of the informant is collected. Therefore, the constructivist and interpretive research paradigm involves narrative inquiry. This is why the research follows an interpretive social science approach to define the nature of social reality as a fluid definition governed by human interaction within a situation dependent on context.

#### **Sources of Data**

The main sources of the research data are primary and secondary.

## **Primary Data**

The primary data are collected from fieldwork. This brings individuals' experience, opinion, perception, and account of how there is the flow of identity across life due to changing context. It brings primary data by placing an individual within a time-flow comparison of his identity due to the changing of context by following five factors.

### [I] Impact of Nepali state in identity flow

The participants were asked how the nation-state influenced their Muslim identity carried by familial, religious, and local context over the years. This relates to the changes in self-identity due to the participants' engagement in government schooling and their exposure to government policies and legal provisions. The main logic behind observing the impact of the nation-state on Muslim identity is the growing influence of nation-states interfering with local and religious ways of life. During the Madhesh movement, there observed the influence of movement where the life of many Bhojpuri-speaking Nepali (including both Muslims and Hindus) were affected for their recognition as Madhesi.

### [II] Influence of modern education in bringing changes in the self-identity of participants

The participants' shifts in self-identity were traced to the increasing influence of modern education. This includes the participants' changing in identity after they were involved in an educated working context, different from the earlier local religious context. The logic behind following the changes in identity due to the influence of modern education is the popularity of modern education and the investment of government in expanding modern education in all localities among every people despite their diverse socio-cultural orientations.

### [III] Effect of social media, science, and technology in leading to a shift in self-identity of participants

The primary data collection included the inquiry into the effect of social media, science, and technology in leading to a shift in the self-identity of participants over the years. The growing effects of social media, science, and technology have affected the local religious way of life. Therefore, there is an investigation of how these factors have brought changes in the identity of Muslim participants.

[IV] Impact of travel, urbanization, and international migration bringing a shift in self-identity  
With the easy access to transportation, migration has become a routine phenomenon. Several purposes for migration in day-to-day life, like employment, education, health issues, etc., can be categorized as internal and international migration. Urban cities have become a major attraction among all youths. Similarly, there has been a rise in the intensity of foreign employment in Nepal, and remittance has become the highest contributor to the national GDP. In such context, there was also an inquiry into how these processes have influenced the self-identity of Muslims.

[IV] Influence of India and other Islamic States in bringing in self-identity of participants  
The data on the fluidity of identity contains the changes in the identity of participants due to the growing influence of India and other Islamic States with increasing access to transportation and social media. Similarly, the emergence of Modi in India and the heightening divide between Hindu-Muslims also led to the shift in identity due to the influence of India.

## **B. Secondary Data**

The secondary data are collected from different sources that contain several published and unpublished journal articles, literatures, census report, survey findings, various books, booklets, online media sources, websites etc. Secondary sources also include information from several Muslim organizations such as Islamic Sangh Nepal, National Muslim Forum and other different Mosques in Nepal. This also included data collection from different legal codes and constitutional doctrines of Nepal.

### **3.2 The Field and Rationale of Site Selection**

The primary data was collected from the field located at Kalaiya, Bara. Bara district is one of the seventy-seven districts of Nepal, located in the Western part of Madhesh Province. Kalaiya is a sub-metropolitan district and the headquarters of the Bara district. Bara district has two sub-metropolitan cities: Kalaiya and Jeetpur-Simera. It is closely linked by a metropolitan city named Birgunj, Parsa (about 13 Km away from Kalaiya) and nearby to the open border of

Nepal (Birgunj-Raxaul). The domestic airport is also located nearby at Simera, Bara. The geographical positioning and socio-cultural heterogeneity provide easy interaction among various religious, cultural, and caste/ethnic groups.

The field selected for study is mixed-type with diverse religious, linguistic, and caste groups in Kalaiya, Bara. At the time of the 2021 Nepal Census, Bara District had a population of 763,137. The main languages spoken in Bara districts are Bhojpuri, Bajjika, Tharu and Nepali. According to 2011 Census of Nepal, the religious composition of district follows the percentage population concentration of about 81.7% Hindu, 13.0% Muslim, 4.5% Buddhist, 0.2% Christian, 0.2% Kirati, 0.1% Prakriti and 0.3% others. It has a heterogeneous nature of caste/ethnic groups with major ethnic/caste groups like Tharu, Yadav, Kanu, Koiri/Kushwaha, Chamar/Harijan/Ram, Hill Brahmin, Teli, Tamang, Kurmi, Dusadh/Paswan/Pasi, Kalwar, Dhanuk, Chettri, Mallaha, Bin, Kumhar, Musahar, Nuniya, hajam/Thakur and other (Census, 2011).

The field site, Kalaiya, is my birthplace. Being a resident of Kalaiya and as a member of a Muslim family, I found that there have been significant changes in the context over the years. The people of Kalaiya have been involved in movements like the Maoist movement and the Madhesh movement, followed by the Madhesi-Pahadi divide during the election after the Madhesh movement. There also up lounds the changes in political regimes from the throwing of Monarchy to the establishment of loktantra (democracy) with the changing of constitutions during this process. It included recognizing Madhesi identity from the Nepali state and naming one of the seven provinces as Madhesh Province. Similarly, the context selected as a primary data field also follows changes due to urbanization, modern education, international migration, social media, the rise of Hindu-Muslim politics with the emergence of Modi, and so on. The changes in the local context of Kalaiya due to national and international factors invited me to look after the shift in identity the changing factors have brought in the identity of Muslims.

### **3.3 Research Design**

This research is qualitative in nature. Its objective is to trace the changes in Muslim identity due to the influence of larger social structures over the longer historical run. The study uncovers the causal relationship of identity with macrostructure. Identity construction is

examined following the contextual changes due to nation-state, travel, urbanization, social media, and the relationship with India and other Islamic states. Therefore, the research design for the study is descriptive and explanatory.

### **Sampling Design: Informants Selection Process**

The Muslims living in Kalaiya, Bara, were selected for my research study. The concentration of Muslims in Bara is 89,685, which is about 13.6 percent of the Bara district population (Census, 2011). The informants, thus, selected were male Muslim candidates from diverse occupations who were above 50 years old. The sample size is ten, and more than 50 years of participants were selected because of the demand for research, which required tracing the shift in self-identity. This required comparison in self-identity at different phases of their life. The logic behind selecting the male Muslim participants was the appropriate comparison among participants from same-sex categorization as the female experience of Muslim identity may be different from the male one.

Purposive sampling is an appropriate sampling technique for selecting samples as informants for my research study. The nature of my research sharply prescribes purposive sampling to inquire about the life histories of participants in order to trace the flow of identity. The logic for applying purposive sampling are; the universe is mixed and the samples required is from Muslim community; the samples from Muslim community are selected in a way that their account of life experience can be used as data to study identity fluidity; the diverse occupational category of sample witnessed the impact of changing context in diverse occupational participants following its influence in identity-shift; the participants with age group above 50 was selected to locate in the identity flow following his account at age of 15, 30, 45, and above 50. The age of 15 for participants symbolizes their experience of identity in their childhood and at the phase of their schooling. In the same way, the age of 30 mainly symbolizes the experience of participants' identity during their working phase (enrollment in occupation). Similarly, the participants experiencing their identity at the age of 45 indicates their experience of identity at the phase of the Madhesh movement. Finally, the 50 and above age of participants reflected the participants' experience of Muslim identity in the current age category.

### **3.4 Methods of Data Collection**

The collection of data required methods like in-depth interviews and observation.

#### **[I] Life History Method**

A life history, life story, or biographical interview is a unique field interview that overlaps oral history. In a life history interview, documentary material about a particular individual's life is gathered through the interview. For a life story interview, the person interviewee is called an informant, who is usually elderly (Neuman, 2015, p. 264). The term "life story" is used to refer to information that lacks supporting evidence. (Tagg, 1985, cited by Neuman, 2015). The open-ended questions were asked to gain insight into how the individual perceived their past. In a life history interview, the exact accuracy of the story is less important than the story itself. The purpose of this interview is to understand how the informant remembers the past through a personal perspective rather than to uncover an objective truth. A life story interview is useful as it provides the interviewer with an in-depth look at another's life (Neuman, 2015, p. 265).

In my research work, the primary data was collected from the field by using the life history method where ten informants were sharply selected through purposive sampling. Here, an in-depth interview was carried out for data collection to get a detailed inquiry into the changes in identity following participants' life histories. The informants, thus selected, were above 50 years old for the purpose of gathering life experiences of 50 years or more. A life story grid was used to get data on life at different ages, mainly at 15s, 30s, 45s, and above 50 (see Annex I for finding the interviews of participants at their different life phases, Annex II for check-list for interview).

#### **[II] Observation**

In observation, as one of the methods of the data collection process, the researcher needs to spend many hours in direct personal contact with those who are to be studied (Neuman, 2006). For this research, I went through two phases of observation—the first as a layperson and a member of the Muslim community of Kalaiya and the second as a researcher.

As a Muslim community member of the research site in the first phase, there observed several

changes. In my own family, there are considerable changes in terms of modern education and the intensification in movement with easy transportation access. My grandfather, also a farmer, had not seen the face of school in their time. He was also involved in the occupation derived from the Muslim caste, Dhuniya. His name was Farzan Miya Dhuniya, and his occupation was aligned with the caste and local occupation of farming. He had the dress up of local culture with dhoti-kurta and gumchha. He could only speak Bhojpuri. However, my father had completed his higher secondary schooling, and he was a government employee with his surname 'Mansoor' rather than my grandfather's surname 'Miya Dhuniya.' He could speak both Nepali and Bhojpuri. In the flow of generation, there were drastic changes. We, all brothers and sisters, are at the graduation or post-graduation level. In my locality, there is also an intensified flow of migration to urban and foreign contexts for the purpose of higher education and employment. Similarly, the issue of identity like Madhesi-Pahadi and Hindu-Muslim has become an issue in the social media and local level elections. Observing such changes pushed me to boost my academic interest in applying a sociological lens to study the identity flow in life histories.

Similarly, in the second phase, as a researcher, I have found that there are several changes in the life of every individual (of all religious groups) due to several factors like the influence of social media and technology among families, the growing influence of modern education in the family; an increasing trend of migration in the locality; growing impact of identity politics derived by Hindutva politics and regional politics with influence of India; and, the increasing impact of globalization, and Islamic state. In addition, I noticed several instances in the community where individuals who used to be heavy drinkers abandoned their habits and turned to religion after participating in Jammatt or Hajj later in life. In the time flow, I have also witnessed Muslims in the locality who were willing to sacrifice their lives for the Madhesi identity eventually distancing themselves from that identity.

### **[III] Reflexivity**

I have also applied the reflexive method to present my own experience as a Muslim during data analysis. I have also shown how my reflexivity over the years in the interaction with modern education and urban context has helped me to be involved in the research topic

selection, and it became a foundation for applying a constructivist orientation while dealing with identity. In dealing with the impact of different macro social structures on identity, I have mentioned my experience that can also further supplement the data.

### **3.5 Profile of Participants/Informants**

In the research study, a total number of 10 Muslim participants were selected to trace the shift in self-identity in the time structure. The participants selected for the study were from different occupations and were above 50 years of age. The brief details on participants followed their education profile, occupational details, and the reason for selecting the participants.

The first participant was a tailor-master. He has been engaged in the caste-aligned occupation of Muslims in the line of the 'darzi' profile. He had attended basic education in both religious and modern schooling up to the age of 12 and then engaged himself in the occupation of tailoring to manage the expenses of the family. The reason why he was selected as the sample of the study was to observe how the changing structure has impacted his local religious orientation of Muslims over the years. Similarly, the second participant selected was a retired government employee. He had attained modern education and had been exposed to an educational context during his working phase. This has helped to trace the changes in identity due to the play of modern education in the lives of participants.

The third participant selected was a retired teacher and political activist. He had also attended modern schooling and had worked in an educational context. In addition, he was also involved in national politics and regional politics guided by the divide of Madhesi-Pahadi. The tracing of the participant's profile led to the analysis of the effect of nation-state and modern education in the identity of participants. In a similar way, the fourth participant is a religious scholar who had completed his religious schooling in India. The tracing of his profile helped to view the influence of religious schooling on his identity. Moreover, this has also shown how Tarai Nepal's sharing of an open border with India is affecting the identity of participants.

The fifth participant was a returnee from foreign employment. He had basic modern schooling and the reason for selecting the participants was to trace the influence of international migration to look at the shift in identity. This involved the observing of identity shift from the effect of

local, national, and international contexts. The sixth selected participant was a businessman who visited several urban cities during his working tenure. The following life account of the businessman can help to record the shift in identity due to the effect of urbanization. Similarly, the seventh participant was a property dealer who was involved in frequent traveling to several places. The tracing of the identity of participants has also helped to view the shift in identity affected by the travel.

The eighth participant was a rajmistri (a mason) who worked by traveling in different urban cities of Nepal and India. The follow-up of his life account helped to trace the changing of self-identity due to the influence of travel, urbanization, and relations with India. As a ninth candidate, a butcher was selected who had not attended modern and religious schooling. The reason for the selection was his belonging to the caste category of Muslim to show how his identity over the years due to the play of several social processes changed. And, the tenth candidate selected was the health practitioner. His experience can help locate the change in identity due to modern education and science and technology.

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

The nature of research data is qualitative, so the information is descriptive. The recorded data is in Bhojpuri language. Initially, the data collected from the field is transcribed in Nepali language. The data collected is transcribed in four stages by— (a) preparing the summary of each section, (b) making a verbatim transcription with minor editing (adding punctuation for sentences and paragraphs), and stage direction (e.g., laughter, coughing); (c) reviewing the whole transcript for clarity of meaning and does further editing and minor re-arranging; (d) has the informant review for any correction and modifications. Then, the transcribed data is translated into English.

The narratives collected from informants in the form of life stories were then synthesized and divided into four age categories of informants—15s, 30s, 45, and above 50. Further, this follows narrative analysis. The narratives collected as life stories of ten informants were categorized into different subcategories to observe the impact of the nation-state, travel, urbanization, social media, and the relationship with India and other Islamic states in the

different dimensions of Muslim identity. This is further followed by pattern matching and process tracking to show identity flow typology (or typologies) with regard to Muslimhood, Muslim manhood, images of Muslim women, images of Hindu-hood, and images of caste-hood.

### **3.7 Limitation of Study**

The study constitutes qualitative research followed by a life story interview with ten participants. The in-depth inquiry from the participants, by driving them through different life phases, allowed to enrich the data required for the study. However, selecting a larger sample size is the limitation set by the time and cost involved in the research study. Similarly, the study has precisely focused the identity fluidity inquiry among Muslims of Bara district and it only targeted to represent the Tarai Muslims of Nepal due to the presence of diversity among Muslims of Nepal according to geographical positioning.

Therefore, the heterogeneity present in Islam in terms of geographical area is not completely covered by the research studies. It has also been unable to trace the identity flow among Muslim women as it is limited up to ten Muslim men. Due to the nature of research demanding life history stories at different phases, the detailed inquiry set limitations in terms of time and resource to go for studies in other geographical areas or in terms of Muslim women among Muslims.

### **3.8 Ethical Consideration**

The code of ethics guides my research work throughout the research journey. During the collection of data, the research followed the code of conduct. The informant's consent was obtained from participants for involving in my research work. In this phase, I also explained to the informant the relevance of my research study and how it will help society directly or indirectly. I have maintained confidentiality and protected the informant from public appearances. For this, I have ensured that the information provided by the informant is kept anonymous. I have applied fictitious first names of informant and their family members.

### **3.9 Field Reflection**

During my field visit, a very new picture arrived, which was not the same as I had thought. Although the field of study was my birthplace, visiting the place for a different purpose and in the new role of a researcher added a distinct experience. In the early phase of interaction with the informants, there created a doubtful atmosphere for open conversation. My local residency and my way of patiently and honestly sharing the purpose of my research created a friendly atmosphere after spending some time together. In accordance with the nature of my study, I sat multiple times with the same informant on the same day, and I also requested and managed to sit for the conversation for the next day in their free hours. The second and onward sittings with the informant were more accessible for data collection, and the participants were comfortable sharing their life stories. Similarly, my belonging as a Muslim provided extra weight among the informant to feel easier to share their viewpoint. I promise to protect the anonymity of participants to encourage open sharing of perceptions and experiences, which further makes the conversation easier.

There was a shocking experience while talking with informants at four different phases of life at 15s, 30s, 45s, and above 50. I was surprised to relate the same participant to different age categories. The informant's Muslimhood at 15 was different from the informant's Muslimhood at other age categories. Within the same participant, I was experiencing like I was encountering four different individuals when I traced their stories at four different phases of life. My experience of relating to the same individual in the early phase of life and later phase of life was full of fluctuations and differences. There was a fluctuation in their appearance and gestures when I was tracing their narration of stories in different times and contexts. In the same way, their way of perceiving Muslim women, caste, and Hinduhood also followed continuous changes.

Due to my Muslim orientation, it was easier for me to have a conversation about religious practices, beliefs, or myths. However, the atmosphere was not as easy to experience at the initial phase of the conversation as it became later on. In some cases, I had long conversations with informants where the informant kept on glorifying the religion of Islam. In this phase, I was also instructed to follow a religious way of life. In the meantime, I used to share my

objective of carrying out my research study for Tarai Muslims of Nepal and I patiently shared that my research study is not linked to spirituality or Islam religion. In this phase, I get help from locals which help me to bring the conversation back to track.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Impact of Local Context, Nation-State, and Modern Education on Muslim Identity**

This chapter involves tracing a shift in the self-identity of Muslims from Tarai Nepal due to the influence of the— local context, nation-state, and modern education in Muslim identity in the time flow. The changes in self-identity follow concerning Muslim-hood, Madhesi-hood, caste-hood, image of Hindu-hood, and woman-hood.

#### **4.1 Influence of Local Context on the Identity of Muslims**

In this section, there is a discussion of how the local and familial surroundings have shaped the identity in the early years of Muslim participants.

##### **[I] The early interweaving of Muslim identity into the local context**

The local context influenced participants experiencing Muslim identity during their early 15s. The earlier childhood phase of participants was confined to the local context. The local context influenced the participants' language, dress-up style, and occupation. Recalling the experience of early 15, the participants mentioned the differences among people in the locality were due to several socio-cultural features prevailing in the society. Nayeem Miya (65), a changed name, shared

Previously, the differences in society were manifested in several ways. The majority of people were Bhojpuri language speakers, and there were localities other than Bhojpuri speakers. For example, the Marwadi community speaks Hindi and lives around the market areas, while the Pahadi community speaks Nepali and shares their own locality recognized as Pahadi tole. Similarly, there were also different localities for lower castes such as Chamarpati and Doom-basti, who live away from other Non-Dalit Hindu castes. In the locality, Muslims also share the Non-Dalit Hindu localities, who were Bhojpuri speakers... (see Annex I)

The participants mentioned that the dominant language of Bhojpuri in the locality was also their mother tongue, like most Bhojpuri-speaking Hindus. Like most other people in their community, they shared that their parents were involved in agriculture. However, the participants further added that the caste-based occupation of Muslims, other than agriculture, was the one that made them different from other Bhojpuri-speaking Hindus. Nayeem Miya

(65), a changed name and a tailor master, mentioned how the caste in Muslims was an influential characteristic of identity in the local context. He shared,

. . . Muslims were also identified by the nature of their work in accordance with caste belonging within Muslims. The distinct works of Muslims of our localities were as tailor master, butcher, dhobi, carding cotton, etc., that differentiate them from Muslims and other Bhojpuri-speaking Hindus.

Similarly, the participants also shared that their dressing was similar to the majority of Bhojpuri-speaking Hindus, where the dress-up pattern in their parents' time was: males wore dhoti-kurta-gamcha, while females wore luga (female wearing sari-type) with a bigger size blouse (also called sameej).

## **II. Participants experiencing Muslim identity during the early phase of childhood due to socialization into family backgrounds influenced by local context**

In the early 15s, the participants shared how their identity involved nurturing within the family atmosphere in the local context. The childhood socialization of participants was limited to the non-educated family atmosphere (each participant admitted none of their parents visited either modern schooling or religious schooling). There was a higher dependence on the learnings from the local context. This phase of participants was dominated by local and religious norms, values, beliefs, myths, perceptions, and practices.

Rahmatullah Ansari (53), a changed name, is a returnee from international migration. In his early phase of 15, he narrated his experiences of familial context with his inclination to a religious way of living,

When I was young, my grandmother taught me that keeping a beard as soon as it starts growing on a male's face is pure. This practice is considered Sunnat in a religious context and is taught in mosques by religious scholars. My family's recommendation, especially my grandmother, influenced me, and I became devoutly religious. At the tender age of 15, I made the decision to dedicate my life to a religious way of living and decided not to shave my beard. I attended religious fasting (during Ramadan) from age 13 and even read Friday prayers most conveniently.

In his age of early 15s, Ansari (53) expressed his belief in the practice of parda and restrictions on women going outdoors. Moreover, in their 15s, the participants shared that the historical tract of familial background influenced societal recognition. The individual identity was tied

with the collective identity of the entire family over the years in the locality. The participants further argued that their long stay in the locality had built closer relationships with people around them despite religious differences. In those contexts, the participants mentioned how the people shared a kinship-type relationship with each other, and there was a local culture of setting *yaarji* (best friends between males) and *sakhi* (best friends between females) that established a family-like relationship between the friends bounded by the culture despite religious differences. One of the participants, Sajid Mansoor (67), mentioned his *yaarji* in the Yadav (Hindu caste) family, where he shared a family-like bond in that family. He also disclosed the closer relation among families in the locality based on family background, which he describes as,

At a societal level, people, despite religious affiliation, have been living in harmony in their localities. Although they have no blood relation, they are bound together through a kinship-like relationship. They address each other in terms of closer relationships like *chaha* (uncle), *chahi* (aunty), *bhaiya* (elder brother), *didi-bahin* (elder-younger sister), *baba* (grandfather) etc., regardless of their religious backgrounds. Similarly, there is a cultural tradition of setting *yaarji* (best friend between males) and *sakhi* (best friend between females), where the best friends share dining and other activities, forming a family-like bond. Furthermore, both religious groups (Hindu and Muslims) attend each other's funerals.

In the next section, there is a discussion on how the national context shapes the individual's identity over time.

## **4.2 Influence of Nation-State Resulting Shift in Identity**

This section encompasses exploring the impact of the nation-state on local Muslim identity formation. This involves inquiring with Muslim candidates about how political events and government policies affect their identity and bring a shift in their self-identity. In this process, substantive changes are tracked throughout an individual's life at different age categories due to the impact of the nation-state.

### **I. The intertwining of Muslim identity within the national context, as a Nepali, causing changes in the earlier local religious baggage of Muslimhood**

Participants experienced a shift in self-identity with regard to Muslimhood in their 30s, 45s, and above after interacting with the nation-state. Over the years, the participants noticed that

they were becoming increasingly aware of the identity of Nepali, and recognizing themselves as Nepali became more frequent. Participants commonly argued that nurturing Nepali identity started with government schooling, learning the Nepali language at school, and providing mandatory citizenship. Similarly, they also stated that the boundary of life transcended local spheres, leading to an experience of common national identity. In the process of their narration of their shift from local religious identity to Nepali, they shared different changes in them. Aasif Mansoor (54), a changed name, who is a health practitioner, mentioned that he was aware of his mother tongue as Bhojpuri. However, the identity as Nepali substituted the Bhojpuri with Nepali as the language of nation and pride. He shared,

. . . Learning the Nepali language as our language at school instilled a sense of pride in me. My identification as Nepali was becoming a collective way of recognition in most of the areas of domains. This helped me to distinguish myself from other Bhojpuri-speaking Indian nationals. . .

The participants also shared that the way of recognition as Nepali introduced several changes in the earlier local religious beliefs and practices. The participants acknowledged that the increasing intervention of the nation-state has even infiltrated their private lives. The participants argued that the nation-state's legal provision defining marital age and enforcing monogamy contradicted the traditional practice of early marriage and polygamy. This resulted in a change in earlier practices in the later phase above 45, in the life of participants. The participants who were earlier positive for polygamy and early marriage by relying on the local religious belief, in the later phase of their life, interpreted the practices as illegal, and they showed their stand away from these practices. The early interpretation of Aasif Mansoor (54) followed the religious way of life at the age of 15, as he described,

It was common for early marriage in the society. Even religion and local context supported the practice. Therefore, we in the family were following the religious and traditional practice of marrying our girls as soon as they reached puberty. It was considered a religious sin to face our daughter directly without purdah after our sister or daughter reached adulthood. I, too, followed the practice in accordance with the religious line.

However, his way of perceiving early marriage changed at his age, above 50. His later narration of early marriage was aligned with his identification of Nepali identity as it constituted the awareness of legal provisions of the Nepali state. He says,

. . . I am legally aware of the law restricting early marriage. I don't support the provision of marrying girls at an early age. Educating daughters is the duty of every parent. We, as Nepali, follow the rule of our nation-state, and I define early marriage as an illegal act to marry our daughter early. . .

Similarly, one of the participants, Sameer Mansoor (68), a retired teacher and political activist, mentioned that he was attracted to national politics with an inclination towards Communist Ideology during his college days and working context. In this phase, he mentioned that he departed away from all kinds of religious backups. Moreover, he also added that there has been a negative glance towards religion during those years. He recalled those contexts as,

There has developed a habit of questioning religion to religious scholars. In fact, the religious scholars were threatened by our team due to our habit of questioning the existence of religion. The religious scholars (Muslim or Hindu) tagged us as *saitaan* or *kaafir* due to our nature of distracting away from religious norms. The mosques or temples had become a faraway subject for us. The red color as a symbol of revolution was the only sort of recognition for us.

## **II. The influence of national identity to shift the participants' self-identity with regard to Muslim womanhood**

The participants experienced a shift in self-identity with regard to Muslim womanhood in their 30s, 45s, and above after their interaction with the policy of the Nepali state. The participants argued that the government's promotion of modern education over religious education and reservation policies changed the local religious way of perceiving women. The later phase, above 50, demonstrated different experiences for participants. The participants disclosed that the growing popularity of modern education and government employment and the easy provision of educating and employing females due to policies of reservation in the name of women, Muslims, and Madhesi motivated them to enroll their daughters (granddaughters) in modern schooling. The attraction towards government education, practicing co-education, and increasing access of women to government employment dismantled the tradition of *parda*, dominant in the early years of participants' lives.

Jalaluddin Miya (changed name), who is 64 years old, was initially opposed to co-education and modern schooling for his daughters. However, in his later years, when he was over 50 years old, there was a change in his perspective. He explained that the Nepalese government's reservation policy, which provided easy employment opportunities for girls, and the growing popularity of modern education had altered his earlier religious beliefs. His newer interpretation marks modern education and co-education as the criteria for setting a higher

prestige in society, and this goes against his own earlier local religious beliefs and practices.

In a similar way, Ramjan Miya (57), a changed name, shared the changes in the religious way of interpretation with the shift in age from the early age of 15 to above 50. His interpretation of Muslim women was in the religious line at the age of 15, as he said,

Initially, at the age of 15, I was against the modern schooling of our sisters in an open environment. I, too, considered it against the religious practice to engage our girls in co-education. Like many Muslims, I also followed the restriction not to expose our girls in public gestures. I, too, considered it against our religion and family prestige. . .

In contrast, Miya (57) mentioned that the changing context at the current age above 50 distances him away from the earlier religious line. He stated that the government's policy for modern education and easy access to employment for females contributed to his deflection in an earlier line of thought. He shared,

. . . at present, the growing popularity of modern education and the easy entrance of girls to fascinating government job opportunities through the scheme of reservations in the name of Women, Madhesi, and Muslims forced me to shift the earlier positioning and attracted me, and many other Muslims like me to send our daughter to modern schooling and preparation of government employment.

### **III. The participant's recognition as 'Nepali' adding newer attributes, bringing a shift in self-identity identity with regard to caste hood and the image of Hinduhood**

The participants who attended government schooling shared their experiences in their phase of 15s and 30s. They mentioned that nurturing Nepali identity from government schooling deflected several earlier grammars and narratives in terms of caste and religion prevailing within family and locality. The participants argued that attending government schools fostered a sense of national identity and pride in the Nepali language as 'our language,' other than the mother tongue of Bhojpuri. Similarly, it nurtured a sense of unity and 'we feelings' among individuals of various religions and castes who share a Nepali identity.

Aasif Mansoor (54), a changed name, shared that his growing sentiments as Nepali from government school distanced him away from the religious and caste basis of distinction among people. He recalled his schooling context to express,

The school was the place of learning for all despite their caste or religion . . . We all students were taught as brothers and sisters despite our inherent backgrounds. The educational performances, rather than caste or religion, were the basis for getting admiration in the classroom.

Similarly, he also mentioned how his earlier meaning of cow dominant in the local context changed after his enrollment in government schooling. He says,

After joining government schooling, my Nepali identity became a dominant way of recognition, and the significance of cows to me became intertwined with my national identity. The reverence for the cow as a national animal was nurtured, promoting a culture of respect and worship towards it. . . This feeling departed from the local narrative, which defined Muslims as beef-eaters.

Additionally, the interpretation of Dashain also changed when he started visualizing the festival as the greatest festival of Nepali despite his earlier religious values that define it as a Hindu festival.

#### **IV. Participants' alignment with national and regional movements with an alignment with an identity of 'Madhesi' resulting in the shift of self-identity with regard to Nepalihood**

The participants experienced a shift in self-identity after their involvement in the Madhesh movement. The experience of Madhesization, according to participants, was amplified during the Madhesh Movement. At their phase of 45 and above, they acknowledged that Madhesi identity was their dominant way of recognition. This way of recognition at the phase was aggressive and sharp for participants, distancing them from Pahadi identity. The participants argued that the identity acuteness of Madhesi brought a change in their earlier way of identifying as Nepali. They commented that the movement brought a split in the earlier identity of Nepali into the categories of Pahadi and Madhesi. The shift from the dominant identity of Nepali to aggressive Madhesi identity, in the words of participants, revived the importance of local characteristics in the lives of participants. Participants expressed that they felt pride in the Bhojpuri language and were alienated from the Nepali language during the movement. Similarly, they also acknowledged the growing importance of local over national after movement, resulting in the return to the local gesture.

Sameer Mansoor (68), one of the participants, mentioned how his involvement in the Madhesh Movement within the Madhesi banner affected his gesture. He said that he aggressively became closer to the Madhesi identity. He narrated,

During the movement, I began adding a traditional garment known as gumchha to my

usual attire of pants and shirts. Previously, I had thought of gumchha as an outdated attire that our parents used to wear, or I considered it as the dress of dehati (illiterate villagers) who engage in agriculture. However, the movement instilled a sense of pride in our Madhesi identity, which included embracing our local customs and traditional dress. . .

Similarly, he also added that the movement affected his social circles, communication medium, and Pahadi's meaning. In his early phases of 15 and 30, he was in close friend circles with the Pahadi community when he considered the Nepali language as his own national language, which carried pride for him. However, his later sharing after the Madhesh movement dislocated him from the Pahadi community and Nepali language. He says,

. . . This was also the time when I started speaking Bhojpuri with pride among my peers and formed our own social circles that were separate from the Pahadi groups. For me, we Madhesis were the historically suffered category who were exploited by the Pahadi. The sentiment and feeling of being Madhesi were so strong inside me that I participated in the Madhesh movement without fear of death from the police who opposed the movement.

When I reflect on my life as a Muslim for more than 25 years, I find multiple fluctuations in my Muslimhood and Madhesihood. During the phase of the Madhesh movement, I was in the complete zone of relating myself as a Madhesi, different than other Pahadi Nepali. I had a kind of anger for Pahadi during that particular phase. I still remember when I was hardly supporting Madhesi parties without any query of local candidates during the first constituent assembly election of 2008. In the phase, I was against other national parties. However, after the COVID-19 pandemic, when I was at home and after suffering from discrimination due to my religious belonging from Madhesi Hindu neighbor, the identity of Madhesi became less significant for me.

In the succeeding section, there will be a detailed inquiry into how the modern schooling context acted as a catalyst for changing identity.

### **4.3 Impact of Modern Education in Bringing Shift in Identity**

The following section discusses the changes in the self-identity of participants that occur with the growing impact of modern education. This involves investigating how the modern schooling environment, course curriculum, learning from schools, and education-led working spheres influence identity over time. It constitutes the inquiry of the overall modern educational context in an individual's life to shape his identity at different phases.

## **I. Participants experiencing a shift in self-identity with regard to Muslimhood after interacting within the educational context**

In phases 30 and 45, the participants working within the educational atmosphere tagged themselves as literate Muslims, different from earlier and other illiterate Muslims. The shift in identity led them to adopt different cultural practices supported by modern education. They marked the culture promoted by modern education as literate and standard, while other earlier practiced religious cultures as illiterate, traditional, and narrow-minded. The adaptation of educational culture inclined the participants toward the practice of family planning, equally treating sons and daughters and considering caste or other inherent differences as insignificant. The participants' mixing into the educational culture makes them different from their own earlier religious orientations. Aasif Mansoor (54), one of the participants, shared his changed orientation on family planning after working in an educational context,

Initially, I, too, followed the long-held belief to consider children as the blessing of God. I considered it a religious sin to go for an artificial way of stopping the number of children, which I (Muslims) took as a gift from *Allah*... In the later phase, I categorized the practice as an illiterate Muslim culture, and I was proudly involved in family planning like many other educated Muslims.

Similarly, the participants who were themselves married in the closer kinship, departed from marriage practice within the close kinship. One of the participants, Aasif Mansoor (54), a health practitioner, shared his experience at 15 when he was married to close kin. At that phase, he pointed out that marrying within close kin was common among Muslims. However, he said that he does not perceive kin marriage positively in the current context. He mentioned that the literate circles, even Muslims, perceive close-kinship marriage as a shameful act.

A similar interpretation can be found in the later phase of Sameer Mansoor (68), a retired teacher. Although he himself was involved in close-kinship marriage in the early phase of his life, he mentioned this practice as unscientific in the later phase of his life. His argument followed scientific reasoning where he admitted that offspring in the closer kinship crossing would not be hybrid (quality reproduction) which made him distance himself away from close-kinship marriage.

In the early phase of life, at the ages of 15 and 30, all participants admitted that there was a play of caste among Muslims during marital practice. However, the later interpretation after

45 and above highly emphasized the inquiry of candidates' educational achievement as a prior priority over caste within Muslims. Aasif Mansoor compares his experience before 30 and 45 when the role of caste and other religious values were dominant. However, he admitted that the intensification of modern education has changed the practices among Muslims.

Previously, Islamic norms, values, and caste categories played a decisive role in the arrangement of marriage among Muslims. The values of Islam forbid the dowry exchanges, and I was also against this practice. However, in the present context, the introduction of modern education has become an influential feature in determining societal prestige. In such a scenario, every parent wants to marry their daughter to a male with a good academic profile, occupational position, income, and proper parental properties. . .

In the present context, he shared that he is himself involved in the exchange of dowry, which has largely intensified among Muslims in recent years. He pointed out the linkage of dowry with modern education, like

. . . modern education prioritizing individual values has led to competition for finding the best male match within Muslim among parents of their daughters. This scenario has shadowed earlier inquiries into caste within Muslims, and it has also resulted in the practice of dowry, which is usual for all. I am too involved in this practice to find a capable match for our daughters.

In my account as a Muslim, I find differences within my orientation as a Muslim before and after completing my University education. After completing my MA degree in Sociology and in the phase of achieving an MPhil degree in Sociology, my Muslimhood is not the same as it used to be a decade ago. In the recent phase, I have become more rational, and my concern for identity has become less relevant to me. When it comes to the phase of the election, I prefer well-educated candidates from my assembly without any influence of caste or issue of Madhesi or religion. I have developed a rational attitude based on science and logic, and the concern of religion is less prior to me after my education.

## **II. Participants experiencing a shift in self-identity with regard to Muslim manhood and Muslim womanhood due to the growing popularity of education**

Over the years, the increasing influence of modern education contributed to many participants revising the earlier narratives regarding Muslim women. At the age of 45 and above, all of the participants marked that the attainment of modern education became an influential component

in defining prestige in society. The participants shared that educational profile, occupational position (mainly in government employment), and income have become fundamental criteria for arranging marriages for either males or females. This changing context, with the dominating effect of education, led to a shift in the self-identity of participants. There are many participants who initially resisted the public appearance of females, but later in life, they changed their views and carried their daughters (granddaughters) to attend co-education in modern schools. Ramjan Miya (57) shared his early experience to highlight his position on Muslim women (or women). He mentioned his early orientation toward women was linked with local religious interpretation. He narrated,

In the previous context, the inquiry about marriage included the girl's behavior, family background, and her engagement in indoor work. This involved the early marriage of girls with the practice of *parda* after they reached puberty (generally 14 and 15 years). I also followed the same way of perceiving the women. . .

However, he added that his earlier interpretation of women (female) changed with the growing influence of modern education in the present context. He showed his newer interpretation of women in the present context,

. . . at present, the context is different. The inquiry of marriage primarily includes girls' modern education and the dowry due to the intensification of dowry practice and the popularity of modern schooling. Many of our daughters get badly treatment at their husband's homes due to the issue of dowry. In this context, I am in the line and also suggest other Muslim parents invest in modern schooling and make them self-capable so that they will not be part of the exploitative practice of dowry. I am not in my earlier line of placing our girls indoors; rather, I want them to stand on their feet. Similarly, I, too, support the equality for women like men and their involvement in coeducation.

Shahid Miya (63), a changed name, who is also a dealer of the property, mentioned how his perception of women changed after his involvement of his daughter in modern schooling. He was initially in the line to place women into the private sphere following the religious and local beliefs that allocated private (indoor) space for females and public (outdoor) space for males. He shared his earlier perception of women, like

Previously, I used to overlook my wife for marketing purposes. I believed that women could only be good at kitchen work. I assumed that women were blunt and could easily be cheated. It was my common understanding that women should be involved in indoor work...

In the later phase of his life, when educating daughters became common in society, he also enrolled his daughter in modern education. His daughter, who is good at education, challenged his earlier meaning of interpreting women. He shared his present interpretation of women,

. . . I realized my assumption to visualize women as blunt was wrong when my educated daughter started helping with household shopping. My wife and daughter are very knowledgeable about the quality of household products and are able to negotiate reasonable prices in the market. They even travel to nearby markets across the border in Raxaul, India, to purchase products at cheaper rates.

Many participants who were in the early phase of their life with binary categorization of male and female (indoor placing for females and outdoor placing for males) were found to be changed in the later phase of their life after modern education became common for both sons and daughters.

When I reflect on my positioning in perceiving Muslim womanhood, it has changed after my university-level education. In recent times, I have become more sensitive to gender issues, and I am a more vigorous supporter of the equality of males and females. A decade ago, I also used to feel superior as a male, but the feeling was not the same after I studied Sociology and carried out research work on gender.

### **III. Participants experiencing a shift in self-identity with regard to caste hood and image of Hinduhood after getting enrolled within a modern schooling environment and education-led working context**

In their early 15s and above, after enrolling in government schools, most of the participants interacted within a different atmosphere than that in their family and locality. After transitioning to education-based professions, the participants shared that they encountered environments distinct from those prevalent in their previous careers in agriculture or caste.

The participants added that they experienced changes in their lives due to the influence of the modern schooling environment and education-led working context. This resulted in reshaping the earlier meaning and implication of caste and religion-based differences. The participants argued that a newer context set by modern education brought individuals from diverse backgrounds to a commonplace, resulting in friendship among heterogeneous backgrounds. The educational criteria became the determinant for acquiring status and employment in the workplace and even in society. The educational context promoted the feeling of equality and homogenous culture among diverse caste or religious groups. Such culture, in accordance with participants, contradicted their earlier religious culture. The participants argued that they

interacted with modern schooling and education-led workplaces and became part of a common culture with a Nepali language and a formal dress code of pants and shirts. This culture differed from local religious culture.

Sajid Mansoor (a changed name), who is a retired government employee, mentioned how he was inclined to a distinct culture during his modern schooling. He shared his earlier experience of his adaptation to different cultures as a student at school,

Before attending modern schooling, I used to associate puja-patha with Hindus and considered the color of Holi as napaak (impure) for Muslims. However, during my time in school, I began to celebrate Saraswati Puja, the Dashain program, and Holi festivals due to my student identity. Also, my perspective changed in relation to Saraswati worship, as she was considered the goddess of knowledge and wisdom and it was common practice within schools to perform rituals in honor of her. . .

Similarly, he also shared his adaptation to practices at school that were different from the learning in a familial environment. He said,

. . . I also adopted the practice of touching books or any stationery items with my head and heart, a form of paying respect to books after they fell down, which included the worship of the goddess of vidya (Saraswati). This contradicted my earlier religious beliefs, as there was a belief that restricted ideal worship and bowing down to anyone other than Allah (God).

In addition, Sajid Mansoor (67) also shared how he usually invites Hindu friends and working colleagues during Bakar-Eid as a recent practice. He mentioned that after sharing classroom and working spheres for years, he developed a familial bond with friends despite their caste or religious belonging. It led him to share dining and every occasion at home. However, his experience of 15 and early 30 was different. He mentioned that there was the practice of inviting Hindus during Eid; however, they opposed sharing Bakar-Eid meat with Hindus as they considered that their religious sweet (meat) can become impure if they share meat with Hindus, who can consume it with liquors (alcohol) which is considered as Haraam (impure) in Muslims.

If I review my own orientation during the course of study, I find significant changes. During my study phase, I became closer to friends from diverse backgrounds, and I became flexible to the different cultural practices of other castes and religious groups. The modern educational context added a feeling of tolerance and respect for other cultures.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Influence of Travel, Social Media, and Relationship with India and Other Islamic States Factor on Muslim Identity**

In this chapter, there is tracing of shift in the self-identity of Muslims from Tarai Nepal due to the influence of the—travel, urbanization, and international migration; social media, science, and technology; relation with India and other Islamic states; and socio-biological factors. This further involves inquiry of changes in self-identity follow concerning Muslim-hood, Madhesi-hood, caste-hood, image of Hindu-hood, and woman-hood.

#### **5.1 Growing Influence of Travel, Urbanization, and International Migration in resulting to the shift in Identity**

In this section, there is a scrutiny of the impact of travel, urbanization, and international migration on changing identity. This constitutes the inquiry with Muslim candidates to point out how their lives undergo changes in their self-identity after interacting with urban and foreign contexts, particularly after easy access to transportation facilities.

##### **I. Participants experiencing a shift in self-identity with regard to the identity of *kisan-girhat* (farmer) due to the growing influence of travel and education**

In their early 15s, all participants linked themselves with a recognition of *kisan-girhat* (farmer). The participants revealed that their parents were aligned with the occupation of agriculture, which popularly derived them from the farmer's identity. The participants also shared that their early livelihood depended on the geographically suitable occupation of agriculture and other caste-based categories of work confined to the local context.

In their later phase of 15s and 30s, the participants experienced the growing impact of transportation, breaking the previous dependence on local context. There was increasing attraction towards cities and foreign countries for work opportunities, hospitals, and educational motives. The participants shared their working interests away from agriculture, making them distant from earlier identity of *kisan-girhat* (farmer). Salamudin Ansari (68), a

religious scholar, revealed how the occupation of farming was becoming unpopular among youths at the age of 15. In contrast, he also mentioned that alternate professions invited by travel and education were gaining popularity, resulting in his (and many other youths) detachment from the earlier identity of *kisan-girhat*.

A similar note can be found in the words of Ramjan Miya (57). He shared his experience at his 30, where he mentioned his dislocation from the earlier identity attached to farming, claiming it a traditional and unattractive occupation. He said,

To engage in agriculture was no longer as attractive as it was in the times of our parents. Agriculture was taken as a traditional occupation. The youths of our generation have newer options to get enrolled in jobs centered in cities and markets. The comparatively easy access to transportation was inviting youths to explore bigger cities in India and Nepal.

## **II. Participants experiencing a shift in self-identity with regard to Muslimhood due to easy access to transportation facilities**

While sharing their experiences of phase 50 and above, the participants mentioned that the growing access to transportation facilities has facilitated distant marriages. This provided an alternative to—the earlier marriage trend of practicing closer kinship marriages or marriage in nearby localities—which were primarily usual when participants were in their 15s. This has impacted the earlier religious orientation of the Muslim participants.

The alteration in Muslimhood due to the growing influence of transportation can be found in the words of Salamudin Ansari (68), a religious scholar. He mentioned that he was against irreligious practices of dowry after his religious schooling. However, in the later phase, during the marriage of his daughter, he shared that he had to be involved in the dowry exchange, which has become an everyday norm for marriage. He shared his experience at the age of 50 and above,

The Muslims of recent times are not the same Muslims as they were earlier, and the influence of religious codes is declining among Muslims. Almost all the Muslims have normalized the practice of dowry in the present context. In such a context, I needed to be a practical Muslim following time and context. Like many Muslim parents, I was also involved in a dowry exchange to find a better match for my daughter, which every parent desire to do for their children. In the context of finding a well-settled male candidate from a wealthy family, the offering of dowry is expected in the locality, and I am also involved in the practice.

In his narration of the cause behind the intensification of dowry, he pointed out that the responsible factor is the growing of distance marriage and the weakening of kinship marriage among Muslims over time with the easy access to transportation facilities. He described his observation of why dowry became a common practice among Muslims. He mentioned that the growing work opportunities in cities have invited people from different locations. In this context, the easy interaction between individuals from different areas results in the marriage arrangement at a farther distance. He shared his case where he arranged the marriage of his daughter after his brother, working in Kathmandu, fixed the marriage of his daughter with his co-worker's son from Sarlahi district (Eastern Tarai district). In his experience, in a distance marriage with no kinship linkage, there is less space for negotiation in dowry exchange, as he says,

. . . the earlier trend of marriage within closer kin gave enough space for negotiation due to the availability of close family members on either side of the marital family. This is used to avoid the strict implications of the dowry regime. However, a distant marriage lacks such privilege for negotiation between family members going for marriage as they hardly know each other like in a close kinship marriage case.

Similarly, the participants working away from their homeland shared how their religious norms, values, and practices changed after their stay in cities. Rahim Alam (59), a changed name, a rajmistri (mason), shared his experience working in the cities. He mentioned that working in cities included sharing a kitchen and flat with teammates from diverse backgrounds (different Hindu castes) in the same occupation. He further added that the sharing of the same kitchen and hotel restaurant with non-Muslim friends resulted in diluting the practice of Halaal and Non-Halaal during the extended stay away from the homeland. He narrated that the food, by default, means halaal, and it was the only common practice at the age of 15 during his stay in his homeland. However, the context became different for him at his stay in the cities, and he shared his experience at the ages of 30 and 45,

. . . working in the cities invited a different scene while eating in the hotel and sharing rooms (flats and kitchen) with friends. In such context, there arose the issue of halaal versus non-halaal. In the teammates sharing the kitchen, most of the members were Hindu and they (Hindu friends) were adapted to eating both halaal and non-halaal. The stay away from the homeland also introduced the newer habits of consuming food in any hotel or restaurant accessible. The line of distinction between halaal and non-halaal also became complex and inseparable. . .

In such context, he argued that the concern of halaal became less relevant and applicable over the long term. He added,

. . .During the initial phase of my stay in the city, I maintained the lines drawn for halaal and non-halaal. However, it became challenging in the long run. In the long run stay in the city, the maintenance of the line became vague, and in many cases, I hardly became concerned with the earlier practice, and I too joined the other friends with the common habit of sharing every kind of food (halaal and non-halaal). . .

He also mentioned that he became accustomed to the culture of consumption of alcoholic products in the city as a standard practice, which he used to consider *haraam* (irreligious) during his stay in his homeland. He describes,

. . .we (despite religion) also developed the habit of performing celebrations after earning in working sites as a standard party culture, common in cities. The way of celebration added the consumption of alcoholic products like beer with friends, which most of us avoid while staying at home. I, too, considered alcoholic products as haram (religiously impure) and maintained distance during my stay in my homeland. The context of the city was different as there was no pressure from family or relatives or anyone (away from their homeland) to talk about such habits in cities that used to be expected in the village. In contrast, the culture of parties and consumption of alcoholic products in cities was common practice. . .

Rahim Alam (59) also revealed that his earlier religious way of life was affected during his stay in the city. He mentioned that he, like his other family members, strictly followed a religious code to keep fasting for one month during Ramadan (Ramjaan). However, he said that staying in the city and sharing rented rooms with friends with diverse backgrounds changed his earlier way of life. In his interpretation of the cause for the change, he argued that the city lacks the festive charm that used to be there during his stay in the village with family members. Furthermore, he mentioned a contrasting atmosphere in the city. He added that his earlier involvement in fasting in the city distanced him from his regular work schedule, making his routine burdensome. He shared his early experience of fasting in the city as

On other days than Ramadan, kitchen work was shared among teammates sharing a flat. However, during Ramadan, I had to cook at different times on the same day as the roommates were from different religions. This used to add an extra load to my work schedule.

Due to the different contexts faced in the city, he decided to quit the practice of Ramadan during his extended stay in the city. He further mentioned

. . . in my extended stay in the city, I felt it burdensome to practice a religious way of life. The atmosphere of the city does not care about the religious follow-up of an individual, like the atmosphere around the village, which closely monitors the steps of the individual. This allowed me to go with the routine of friends, and I left fasting during my later stay in the city.

In a similar way, Ramjan Miya (57), a businessman running a business in Kathmandu, shared

his experience of staying in the city. He mentioned that his religious belief, which was against family planning, changed after staying in the city. He expressed that life in the city is costlier, and it is expensive to go for a larger number of children. He mentioned that having a large family in rented rooms in the city is not practical, and there are no nearby relatives to help with child-rearing, unlike in the village. That's why he adopted family planning, which is a common norm in the city. However, his beliefs were different when he lived in the village, where he followed religious codes and was against family planning.

In my stay in Kathmandu for about decades, I found shift in my identity with regard to Muslimhood. In the selection of Halaal (religiously defined as pure) and Non-Halaal (religiously defined as impure) food in hotel-restaurant, I became flexible for eating foods in hotel-restaurant. Initially, I was rigid in making hard inquiry, and I prohibit myself from a hotel restaurant without clear differences between Halaal and Non-Halaal. However, in the recent context, this inquiry of food has somehow blurred, in most of the cases.

### **III. Participants experiencing a shift in self-identity with regard to caste-hood, and image of Hinduhood due to the practice of restaurants and rent culture away from homeland**

In their 30s and 45s, the participants mentioned that visits and stays in urban and foreign contexts were becoming common. The participants who spent years in cities during their work disclosed a significant difference in context in the cities than in their homeland. They engaged in renting and restaurant culture popular in cities. The renting involved the participants sharing a room and kitchen among friends with similar occupations but with diverse identical backgrounds. The participants argued that their stay in the city involved enrolling in a homogeneous and standard city culture that was not in line with their homeland's religion or caste-based identity. Rahim Alam (59), while expressing his experience in the working years of his 30s and 45s in the cities, revealed that his earlier line of religion and caste, which were dominant during his early stay in the homeland, got blurred. During his stay in the cities, he mentioned the closeness with friends of different religious and caste backgrounds that distanced him from religious practices without drawing a line in the name of identical differences.

During their stay in the city, the participants shared their experiences and mentioned that the line between religion and caste is blurred in urban areas. Ramjan Miya (57) and Rahim Alam (59) shared how their experience of using the common kitchen and being close to the hotel-restaurant culture helped to soften their feelings of caste or cultural differences. During their stay in the city, they were more involved in the common culture of the city which was away from local religious culture.

#### **IV. Participants experiencing a shift in self-identity with regard to Muslim manhood, and Muslim womanhood due to the stay of participants away from their homes**

The participants shared the changes in how they perceive women after they travel to earn money away from their homeland. Rahim Alam (59), one of the participants, mentioned how his earlier way of relating women to *ghar-grihasta* (indoor works) changed after experiencing different contexts in cities. He added that he became familiar with contrasting urban environments where women commonly worked outdoors like men. This allowed him to treat his wife differently than earlier ones, as he mentioned that visits to his wife outdoors became common for household work, and he started taking it as a normal phenomenon. He narrated those experiences as,

. . .in my 15s, women were considered to perform household indoor work, which was popularly recognized as *ghar-grihasta*. I also used to relate women with *parda* fitting into the exact role of handling family and indoor work. . . my experience in the town changed my way of thinking as women equally share outdoor work in the city. Therefore, I, too, allowed my wife to handle the home on her own in the time phase of my engagement in works away from home. . .

Ramjan Miya (57), one of participants who stayed years in urban context, also mentioned how his stay in urban cities made him a different Muslim from the rural (village) Muslim. He shared that his stay in the city allowed him to draw the line between rural Muslims and urban Muslims. Here, he marked rural Muslims as ‘backward,’ ‘conservative,’ and ‘traditional’ while he identified the urban Muslims as progressive and open-minded. He placed himself in the category of urban Muslim with introduction of several changes in his earlier way of perceiving females. This allowed him to break several earlier meanings related to women, where women were related with *parda*, house property, and binary categorization of works for males and females in religion, where females were allocated indoor works. His recent interpretation of

the male and female roles carries equality, which distances him from his earlier religious-based interpretation of women that he used to stick to before his visit to the city. These changes introduced in him also applied to changing the earlier roles of his wife.

Similarly, Rahim Alam (59) also shared how his earlier manhood was challenged and changed after his stay in the city. He mentioned that he was engaged in the kitchen and other indoor works in the city, which he considered women's work during his early stay in his homeland. He narrated,

. . . there was a religious and societal perception that males were allocated for outdoors while females were assigned for indoors. The males performing indoor work in the village were considered the third gender as gay (*mauga*), and it was against societal prestige. However, during our stay in the city, we were forced to be involved in kitchen work and washing clothes (indoor work). These ways of males performing in-door work were common in cities. . .

When I reflect on my Muslim manhood before entering in urban context of Kathmandu, I was maintaining a clear line of differences on the role of male and female. For about more than 15 years stay in my hometown, I never entered kitchen or washing of clothes were also rare for me. However, after I started staying in Kathmandu for my study purpose after SLC, I involved in every kinds of work which I initially considered as female work. Similarly, the urban context also taught me to revise my earlier way of differentiating work on the basis of sex as the males in urban were doing every work unlike it was case at my hometown.

#### **V. Participants experiencing a shift in self-identity with regard to Madhesihood and Nepalihood after finding themselves as inferior in a different context away from their homeland**

The participants shared their experiences during their work tenure and stay in an urban and foreign context. Rahim Alam (59), one of the participants, recalled his experience of working in urban cities of Nepal with the dominance of Pahadi Nepali speakers, which provided a different context than that in his homeland. He stated that his feelings about Madhesi became sharper during his stay in the hill cities of Nepal. During his stay in their homeland in the 15s, he mentioned that he never experienced the issue of language as his mother tongue, Bhojpuri, was the common language of that area. However, the working tenure in urban areas in the 30s and 40s, mainly the Hilly belt of Nepal, exerted a different experience for him, with the

dominance of the Nepali language and Pahadi community. He stated that interaction in distinct contexts where Bhojpuri was inferior compared to the Nepali language constructed him with sharp feelings of Madhisiness and belonging to Madhesi. He shared,

. . .our language differences can easily distinguish us from Pahadis, creating further differences while working in Hill cities of Nepal. Unfortunately, there is a negative perception of North Indians, particularly those from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, or those who speak Bhojpuri, among Pahadis group. Similarly, Madhesis of Tarai Nepal, who speak like North Indians or Bhojpuri speakers, also have to face inferior and ill-treatment due to their language differences. Negative labels such as "Bhaiya" or "Dhoti" clearly distinguish Madhesis from Pahadis. I have personally experienced such differences during my time working in the cities of Hill, Nepal.

In the same way, Rahmatullah Ansari (53), one of the participants who experienced his stay in a foreign land, mentioned that national identity matters in the foreign land rather than caste or religion. He expressed how his feelings of Nepali identity suffered an inferiority status among different nationals where nationality was a dominant way of recognition. He explained that such context exerted a strong sense of belonging to Nepali in the foreign land. He further added that he experienced differences among the same religious groups with different nationalities in a foreign land, which led him to identify as a proud Nepali Muslim rather than simply a Muslim. He narrated the experience of his early 15s, when he believed that religious belonging was universal and the feeling of brotherhood for all Muslims. However, he mentioned that his early belief in Muslim brotherhood broke when he encountered Muslims from Gulf countries. He describes the context as,

The Muslims of the Gulf countries were richer, and they held the status of the owner of the company and treated every worker (despite their religion) in similar ways. They hold a higher degree of power and resist any individual (despite being Muslim) to keep marital (or any closer) relations in their nation. These richer Islamic states only privileged the rights of the citizens of that particular state. In those phases, I understood that the only identity that matters in the world is national identity. I also felt proud to be recognized as a Nepali Muslim rather than as a Muslim solely.

In the next section, there is a discussion on the increasing role of social media, science, and technology in altering the individual's identity in the long term.

## **5.2 Increasing Role of Social Media, Science, and Technology Leading to a Shift in Identity**

This section carries a careful examination of the role of social media, science, and technology in changing identity over time. The section revolves around the discussion on how the Muslim

candidates in different phases of their lives have experienced changes in their identity with regard to Muslim-hood, caste-hood, the image of Hindu-hood, and womanhood after interaction with social media, science, and technology.

### **I. Participants experiencing a shift in self-identity with regard to Muslimhood due to the increasing use of social media**

The participants shared their changes in beliefs, practices, appearance, and way of life due to the changing context offered by the growing influence of social media. Salamudin Ansari (68), a religious scholar, expressed his earlier interpretation of television and other social media, where he, along with other religious scholars, resisted the use of television by targeting it against religious faiths. He recalled the conversation among his colleagues among religious scholars in his phase of 30s and 45s,

It was common faith among religious scholars that the television was for the purpose of spreading nudity and destroying the 'imaan' (faith) of Muslims. In fact, it was considered a distraction by seitan (evil powers), who were trying to mislead the path of the 'real Musalman.' This was taken as a tool to ruining the culture of Islam and dissolving the *parda* from our sisters/daughters. Initially, this is why we were all opposed to using television.

However, in the later phase of 50 and above, he recalled how social media, including television, has become popular among every group in society. He mentioned the contrasting changes in his beliefs and practices when he started using television (other social media) to enhance his religious learning. He added that he has been following the television programs of Zakir Nayek to sharpen his religious learning of Islam.

In the interview, most participants shared how the influence of social media changed their looks and appearance. Sajid Mansoor (67) expressed his shift in appearance according to the changing of the Hindi Cinemas following the appearance of actors in cinemas. Similarly, the participants also accepted how the current naming practices among Muslims were less aligned with the caste line of Muslim identity. Instead, it follows the famous names from different TV serials and movies. In this line, Sameer Mansoor (68) shared how the naming pattern in the current context follows the social media that blurred the caste attachment in the names of Muslims that practiced in the early phase.

The early 15s and 30s of participants experiencing Muslim identity were bound to the interpretation based on local narratives. In contrast, the later phase of life of participants above 50 was influenced by the growing impact of social media disrupting the local content. The participants argued that the image of Muslims broadcasted by social media contains ideal religious painting that avoids local content. The influence of social media contributed to the introduction of newer food items and dresses in the name of Muslim stuff. The participants shared their changes in taste in local dress-up and food items with the influence of social media. Jalaluddin Miya, aged 64, expressed his opinion that social media has significantly impacted how religion is demonstrated. He mentioned how his family shares photos of EID and Bakar-EID on their personal social media accounts, using their mobile phones and wearing costumes that reflect religious gestures. He added that social media and transportation have made him more aware of the ideal Muslim attire and food culture. As a result, he chose to wear a Pathan Suit during the last occasion of Eid. Similarly, Sajid Mansoor, who is 67 years old, mentioned how social media has affected his family's food habits. He pointed out that social media has influenced the identification of food items with religion. As a result, many new food items have been introduced in his family, such as biryani, korma, kabab, and kima, which are now recognized as Muslim food.

Similarly, the growing influence of science and technology has also affected participants' religious beliefs. In the early phase of 15, the participants were inclined to a religious explanation of health-related issues. However, the same participants linked the issues related to health with hospitals and scientific ways of adopting treatments. Aasif Mansoor (54) narrates his early faith in religion to treat health-related issues. He shared his experience around the age of 15s,

In early times, people believed diseases were caused by supernatural powers such as the evil eye. As a result, the remedies were sought through religious or worship practices. Religious scholars and shamans were considered to be experts in treating health-related problems. They used *tabeez* or *laung* (cloves) bonded with religious prayers for the treatment process. I, too, believe religious scholars' instructions for treating disease. . .

However, in the later phase of the 30s and 45, he expressed that he marked his earlier beliefs on the dependence on religious scholars as superstitious, and he shifted his reliance on health-related issues from prayers to science and hospitals.

## **II. Participants experiencing a shift in self-identity with regard to Muslim manhood and womanhood due to the growing use of mobile phones and social media**

The participants expressed differences in their orientation to perceive different religious and local beliefs regarding Muslim women after their interaction in the context of the influence of social media. In this changing of time and context, changes in the manhood of participants can be traced. A participant working away from his homeland mentioned that the meaning and application of *parda* became different after the travel and use of mobile phones became famous in his 30s and 45s. He interpreted that the *parda* for him was initially linked with the restriction of women indoors. However, he showed his change in the meaning of *parda* after working away from his homeland and the use of mobile phones became popular. For him, the *parda* is simply related to the loyalty of the wife rather than her indoor restriction. He narrates,

. . .I, too, permitted my wife to use mobile phones. The mobile phones were initially considered against the belief of *parda*. In a way, my perception of *parda* has changed. Previously, I used to relate *parda* with the restriction of women from the public or other strangers' gesture. However, in the present context where foreign employment and mobile phones became like compulsory, the *parda* for me is the loyalty of the women. It means the women or girls should not be restricted into four walls rather they should also share the workload of outdoor. However, they need to maintain the prestige of the family by not doing any work that hurts their husband's trust.

Similarly, the local culture favoring the rule of avoidance was interrupted by the growing social media trend. The participants, in their 15s, 30s, and 40s, were found to follow the culture where women, especially their daughters-in-law, maintain a distance from the senior male members (*sasur-bhaasur*) in the family. However, the participants expressed that the experience of those above 50 marked the earlier culture of the rule of avoidance as traditional, and they found it to support the culture of being frank with family members despite gender or age, following the open culture promoted by social media. In the current context, the participants who previously followed the rule of avoidance have now embraced the culture of sharing a single frame of photos with family members on social media. The changes in the culture can be found in the interpretation of Aasif Mansoor (54) in his age above 50, who says,

In the early context, there was a culture among married females (daughters-in-law or *patoh*) to maintain a distance from senior male members (*sasura buwa* or *sasur*, *jethaju* or *bhasur*) of the family. However, the popular trend of uploading photos of every family member within a single frame on social media has impacted early local customs. In fact, the earlier culture favoring the rule of avoidance is considered traditional among the newer

generation, and there is an expansion in contrasting cultures of being 'frank' with each other in the family without hesitation, and it is taken as modern culture.

Furthermore, the participants also mentioned that their earlier belief in parda was hampered after their dependence on hospitals for health-related issues. Aasif Mansoor (54) expressed the earlier experience of his 15s when the practice of parda was dominant for the case of health related issues. He stated,

Girls were expected to maintain parda (modesty) and were treated within the home. Even the issue of childbirth was handled by female practitioners within the society. Females were supposed to avoid contact with strangers males and maintain proper screening.

However, at the age of 30s and above, he revealed the change in the earlier notion of parda after the growing influence of hospitals. He shared that when his wife was pregnant, he did not want to risk her life by insisting on a home delivery due to religious or cultural beliefs. Instead, he consulted with a doctor regardless of their gender in order to ensure the safety of his wife and child. He describes it as,

In hospitals, educated doctors and staff follow a scientific process to treat patients. They have access to modern tools to handle serious cases, which has resulted in a decrease in the number of deaths of children and mothers. On the other hand, home deliveries are risky and lack scientific tools and equipment. Therefore, doctors are assigned with this job of treatment and their gender should not be a factor in determining their ability. We need well-educated and experienced doctors for delivery, regardless of their gender. The practice of "parda" is a traditional and narrow-minded belief.

In the later phase of the life, the Earning of the son from foreign employment allowed the participant to be involved in religious practices.

The subsequent section analyzes how India and other Islamic states have influenced an individual's identity over time.

### **5.3 Effect of India and Other Islamic States to Result a Shift Identity**

In this section, there is a discussion of how the relationship with India and other Islamic states contributed to shaping the identity of participants in the time flow. It involves follow-up of the life sketch of participants to trace the changes in identity due to the changing context introduced by the influence of India and Islamic states. This constitutes a comparison of various dimensions of the life of Muslim candidates at different age categories to figure out the changes in identity.

## **I. Participants' early experience of Muslim identity affected by a closer relationship with India**

The participants also showed that the closer context of nearby India influenced their early identity. They mentioned that the practice of marriage was common to the closely linked nearby border of India. The interview found that it was common practice among participants to marry in India due to the close and open sharing of the border.

Sajid Mansoor (67), a government employee, who was married in India, mentioned that the marital context led him to learn the Hindi language. In addition, the participant. In the early life phase, most of the participants attending religious learning explained the role of religious scholars from India in contributing to their religious consciousness. Salamudin Ansari (68) also expressed the influence of India in the early and later phases of his life. Ansari (68) said that his involvement in formal religious education resulted from interacting with religious scholars from India visiting the Jamaat. He described:

My family was motivated by one of the religious scholars (Moulbi) who visited the mosque of his village for Jamaat. The Moulbi convinced my parents to pursue religious study, and he further reflected on the benefit of how the parents managing their children for religious study are sent directly to heaven. Moreover, he (Moulbi) also informed my parents about the provision of free feeding and settlement in the religious school of India, which allowed my parents to choose the option easily.

In the later phase of his life, Ansari (68) argued that his engagement in religious education and work as a religious scholar made him more inclined to religious rituals and directed him to revise the local norms and practices against Islam.

## **II. Participants experiencing a shift in self-identity with regard to Muslimhood due to the easy mobility of religious scholars from India and other Islamic states**

The participants shared their recent experience after age 45 when they noted that improved transportation had increased the mobility of religious scholars from various parts of India and other Islamic nations. In the newer context set by easy traveling, the participants shared their thick practice of visiting *jamaat* and Ijtema ceremonies, leading to interaction with Muslims from India and other Islamic states. In the interview, participants mentioned that their earlier way of life changed after attending these ceremonies. One of the participants, Sajid Mansoor

(67), stated that his earlier gentleman's appearance during his work as a government employee shifted in the religious color after his visiting Jamaat during his retirement period. The conversion to religious appearance included a bigger size beard with a small mustache, wearing a kurta-pajama-topi, and following roza-namaaz. He mentioned that his earlier appearance during work tenure was influenced by the diverse context supporting gentleman's look following social media. However, he argued that his appearance changed after his retirement when he started spending most of his time with family and relatives. This phase of life led him to attend religious jamaat, which changed his earlier identity. He described:

One of my relatives took me to jamaat for one month, and things then changed. I met religious scholars and devotees from India and other Islamic countries. I received training in religious ways of life. I strictly started reading namaaz five times, and fasting during Ramadan became compulsory for me. I transformed my appearance with the new practice of keeping a big beard and a small mustache with a white kurta-pajama and topi. I decided to live the remaining years of my life in the servitude of *Allah* (God). This changed me from a gentleman to a devotee of Almighty Allah.

### **III. Participants experiencing a shift in self-identity with regard to Muslim manhood and Muslim womanhood due to attending religious education in India**

The participants shared that the religious scholars from India contributed to their religious way of life. One of the participants, Salamudin Ansari (68), mentioned that religious schooling in India and working in a context full of religious environment changed his earlier practices. After schooling in India, he mentioned that he introduced the practice of a burqa to the family members by replacing the earlier familial practice of ghumto based on local culture. After completing his religious education, he expressed that he began to view women through a lens of religious norms and started considering them as subjects of parda. Similarly, he also added that he refused to copy the practice of family planning in the context where many Muslims were practicing family planning. In phase 45, he shared that the context has changed from the earlier ones as the children, in the early context, were considered as the gift of almighty Allah (god). However, he argued that the majority of Muslims, in the changing context, were adopting family planning. He narrated the change as,

There was a kind of distinct environment around my context when the people around me had started planning for smaller families. There was the newer narrative of defining

smaller families as happier families. . . However, I selected not to go against my religion with the hope that the almighty God would determine the future of my children.

#### **IV. Participants experiencing a shift in self-identity with regard to Madhesi-hood, and image of Hinduhood due to the influence of Indian cinemas and news media from India**

The participants shared their fluctuation in the way they perceive Hindus and their relationship with Hindus after the increasing context polarization between Hindus and Muslims, mainly after the emergence of Modi in India and the higher influence of news channels in the locality. The participants mentioned their recent experiences of how the increasing influence of hate speeches from social media and mainstream media in India had redefined the meaning of Muslim identity and their relationship with Hindus in their localities.

At ages 15 and 30, they showed their harmonious and kinship-type relationship with Hindus in the locality. In the same way, in their 45s, they mentioned their experiences where they showed how they (Bhojpuri speakers) stood together as ‘Madhesi’ against Pahadis during the Madhesh Movement. However, the same participants shared a divide within the Bhojpuri-speaking Madhesi into the religious line of Hindus and Muslims. Sharing their recent experiences, the participants shared how they take the Muslim side and engage in the ongoing toxic Hindu-Muslim debate common in their locality in the present context. They said that they became more vocal and aggressive nature towards Hindu and Muslim issues. Sajid Mansoor (67) also mentioned how, due to negative presentations of Muslims in the Indian mainstream media, when Muslims experienced feelings of discrimination and otherization from Hindus. The increasing distance between Muslims and Hindus, according to him, resulted in him fitting into the Muslim identity, who often engaged in debates, becoming vocal and aggressive to show his identity as superior.

The experience of identity fluidity can be found in the words of Rahmatullah Ansari (53), a returnee from international migration under the influence of India. He mentioned how his engagement as Madhesi during the Madhesh movement split into Hindu-Muslim after the way of blaming Muslims as a spreader of the coronavirus pandemic broadcasted by Indian media. He described his distancing from Madhesi as,

There started a forceful mechanism of otherizing us as a Muslim category. . . The air of hatred against Muslims was swinging from the national media and the politics of the ruling party of India, which was jointly hampering the perceptions of local people against Muslims. Initially, we all were Madhesi for me. After such context set by India, the Hindus who were together as Madhesi started otherizing us as Muslims solely. This context also forced me to create a binary of Hindu-Muslim within Madhesi—where I am placing myself with a pure recognition of Muslims and the rest of Hindus as others.

The final section comprises a discussion of identity changes due to socio-biological factors in the participants' lives.

#### **5.4 Socio-Biological Factors Bringing Shift in Identity**

In this section, there is a discussion of how age and changing social context contribute to shaping an individual's identity. The identity of participants involved in the interview resembles in a different way with the changing phases of their life. This included the changes in Muslimhood, and the image of womanhood in an individual identity with social context contributed with an increment in age.

##### **I. Participants experiencing a shift in self-identity with regard to Muslimhood due to an increment in age and increasing dependencies on family members in the locality**

The participants shared their experiences at 45 and above to argue how changing age introduced several changes in their earlier adulthood routines. They mentioned the changes in their routines due to various factors such as retirement from adulthood work, decreased physical ability compared to their adulthood, illnesses, returning to their homeland after working away from homeland for years, spending more time within the local Muslim community surrounded by family members and relatives, and the increasing fear of death.

The participants stated how the increasing health problems and growing dependence on family members with increment in age shifted them to a religious way of life. The participants argued that after spending more time with family members and relatives, the religious atmosphere at home pushed them to engage in religious activities. One of the participants, Sajid Mansoor (67), a retired government employee, mentioned his involvement in Jamaat after his retirement transformed his earlier modern and standard gentleman's look of working tenure to religious

guidelines. Similarly, the participants also added to serve their lives to the servitude of God (Allah) after going through illness and fear of death. Similarly, the inclination towards religious beliefs after the age of 50, can also be found in the words of Shahid Miya (63). Miya (63) expressed how he slowly reduced and then terminated the practice of levying interest in investment (beyaaz) practice. He said that his current gesture in the religious way of life, after growing dependence on family members, pushed him to reduce and terminate the practice of beyaaz, which is considered irreligious in Islam.

## **II. Participants experiencing a shift in self-identity with regard to womanhood due to an increment in age and increasing dependencies on family members**

In their 30s and 45s, the participants who shared their less reliance on religious norms and practices were found to have different interpretations in the later phase of their lives. Participants health related issues and growing dependence on family members after the age of 50 changed their earlier take on religion. In this phase, the participants became more inclined to religion with their argument to revive some of the religious norms and beliefs. Shahid Miya (63), a dealer of property, who was initially against religiously defined gender roles, later expected his daughter-in-law to adhere to religious values by caring, cooking, and managing household work. With his dependence on the family members, he narrated how religion became one of the deciding factors while searching for a daughter-in-law. He shared his experience above 50,

We (couples) are heading towards our old age, and our health status is also not good. So, we are searching for a religiously aware daughter-in-law who can properly care for the entire family. In addition to the modern education, we also prefer her religious education. We have enough property for our son and don't want our daughter-in-law to work outdoors. Rather, she should give good management of the family. Therefore, we want our daughter-in-law to be from a religious and well-cultured family who have also proven their daughter's religious schooling along with modern schooling.

In this way, it can be found that identity is not rigid or pure; rather, it changes with time and context. In the life story of ten participants, it can be seen that there is influence of nation-state, modern education, travel, urbanization, international migration, relationship with India and other Islamic States in fluctuating the identity of participants over years. Moreover, my own account as Muslim for more than 25 years is also changing. I have encountered with changing

of Muslimhood, Madhesihood and image of Muslim womanhood after I entered with Madhesh Movement, modern education and my experience in urban context.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Fluidity In Muslim Identity: Key Findings, And Conclusion**

This chapter extracts the findings from the collected data. It constitutes the analysis of how the participants are experiencing a shift in self-identity with regard to Muslim-hood, manhood, womanhood, caste-hood, and the image of Hindu-hood. The shift in identity is analyzed in relation to the time structure.

#### **Key Findings**

##### **6.1 Participants experiencing a shift in self-identity with regard to Muslimhood over the years**

The study shows that the participants' experience of Muslim identity in the early 15s differed from their experiences in the 30s and onwards. The participants revealed the dominance of local and familial context in their early 15s to shape their language, dress-up, practices, beliefs, values, and perceptions. However, the participants, later on, experienced the increasing involvement of nation-states in reshaping their early identity as Muslims, mainly through mechanisms like legal codes, government policies, and government schooling. The interference of the state has resulted in changes in marriage practice in the recent trends where monogamy and comparative late marriage have become common due to the legal definition of the appropriate age of marriage and enforcement of monogamy. The induced changes contradict the early religious and traditional practice of marriage, where participants were involved in early-age marriage and polygamy.

In a similar way, the participants in the study also admitted the growing influence of government schooling over religious schooling brought several changes in their earlier local religious baggage. The participants shared that their experience of government schooling and working within the educational atmosphere differed from their early upbringing in a non-educated family atmosphere. The participants acknowledged that communicating in the Nepali

language in an educational context is different from the locally communicated language of Bhojpuri. The participants, in their 30s and 45s, encountered several changes after they defined themselves as literate Muslims, which is different from illiterate and traditional Muslims. The adaptation of educational culture as a literate Muslim inclined the participants toward the practice of family planning, equally treating sons and daughters, and considering caste or other inherent discrimination as insignificant. The participants' mixing into the educational culture makes them different from their own several earlier religious orientations. The educational attainment resulted in participants distancing themselves from earlier religious beliefs of going to a larger family size, considering a child as the blessing of God. The practice of prioritizing the modern education of an individual for marital criteria has weakened the earlier play of caste within Muslims, and this has intensified the irreligious practice of dowry among Muslims. In addition, the participants also shared their changed perception of kinship marriage after their years of spending time in the educational context dominated by Hindu friends who considered close kin marriage as a shameful act. This changed perception has led to a departure from marriage practices within the close kinship, of which they were themselves a part.

The research study manifests that participants' early experience of Muslim identity was intertwined with the occupation of agriculture. In their early 15s, the participants linked themselves with recognition as a kishaan-girhat (farmer) within the local context that is geographically suitable for agriculture. However, the growing access to transportation has shifted the dependence on agriculture and opened several work opportunities in cities and foreign countries away from the local context. The participants get alienated from the earlier identical tag of kishaan-girhat in their 30s and onward after engaging in works different from agriculture. The increasing transportation access has changed the earlier marital practice limited within closer localities. Additionally, it facilitated distant marriage and broadened the option of marrying away from the closer kinship in Muslims. This further promoted the nonfamilial marriage trend, opening non-negotiating room for marriage and resulting in the intensification of dowry practice among participants.

Similarly, the participants during the interview also shared that their early experience of Muslim identity, in their 15s and 30s, was intertwined with the familial backgrounds of

participants with long stays in the locality. However, the growing influence of social media has disrupted the earlier recognition of identity, which was limited to the smaller boundaries of locality following the family records of participants from generations. In phase 45 and above, the participants admitted that their earlier local criteria of recognition were dismantled by the image of Muslims broadcasted on social media. This resulted in a trend of copying food items and dressing patterns in the name of Muslim culture, especially during festivals. The naming pattern initially aligned to the caste basis in Muslims also shifted after the growing craze of following the names from TV serials and movies. Additionally, the growing usage of television also used to change the narrative of 'True Musalman.' In the early 45s, the participants resisted the usage of television and considered it against true Muslims for distracting the Muslims away from their religious faith and parda practice. However, in the later phase of 45, the same participant followed the religious program on television to sharpen his religious education.

Moreover, the study reveals that the closed and open border with India has also impacted the Muslim identity of participants. In their early 15s, the participants expressed their basic learning of religious education was assisted by religious scholars working in the nearby mosques. In addition, the growing mobility of religious scholars from India and other Islamic states has influenced the later life of participants, mainly after 45. This resulted in comparatively the dense participation of participants in the jammāt and ijtema ceremonies, which was found to change the early gentleman's look (from a modern educational context) of participants into a religious color. The growing age is also a factor altering the religious outfits of participants where the participants above 50 were found to be titled to religious practices (roja-namaaz) with religious appearance (big beard with small mustache) after their experiencing health problems, dependence on family members and fear of death.

## **6.2 Participants experiencing a shift in self-identity with regard to Muslim manhood and Muslim womanhood over the years**

There is a significant difference in participants' perception of females in their 15s, 30s, 45s, and above 45s. The participants' sharing of experiences at different years of their lives further

demonstrates the shift in self-identity in regard to manhood. The study shows that the participants, in their 15s and 30s, were inclined towards religious and local norms that restricted women from public gestures through *parda* practice. The participants were against modern schooling of females in their 15s and early 30s because modern education practicing co-education violates their traditional norms of *parda*. Similarly, the participants in their early phase were also religiously aware of the binary allocation of work between males and females, where males were assigned to public spheres while females were responsible for private spheres. In this phase, the participants were engaged in outdoor work, fitting themselves in traditional roles of males, and their wives were performing kitchen work.

At the age of 45 and above, the participants shared their changing perceptions regarding females due to the change in the context set by the growing popularity of education. They expressed that the acquiring of modern education and government employment has become a newer criterion for defining prestige in society. The government reservation schemes in the name of women, Madhesi, and Muslims for education and employment have also motivated the parents to engage their daughters (granddaughters) in modern schools. Additionally, the participants also reflected on the growing importance of modern education, where the inquiry of education has become a basic requirement for arranging marriages for both males and females. These are the reasons why there has been a shift in the perception of participants. Many who previously practiced *parda* are now in favor of modern schooling practicing co-education. Similarly, the participants also admitted that the practice of educating daughters in modern schools had revised their earlier perception to consider women as blunt who could be easily cheated, and there developed a sense of equality for both males and females.

In the same way, the participants who were involved in working in cities and foreign countries in their 30s and 40s shared their different experiences than 15s that brought a shift in self-identity with regard to Muslim womanhood and manhood. The participants, in their 15s, were strict followers of *parda* practice and used to relate women to '*ghar-girhasti*' (in-door works). However, the context changed after they were involved in work in cities where women working outdoors was common. Similarly, the changing context of their absence at home allowed their wives to slowly take over the outdoor shopping and marketing of compulsory stuff at home.

This changing context enabled the participants to identify themselves as urban Muslims who are open-minded and modern, while rural Muslims, whose lives were confined to local context, are traditional, rigid in religion, and narrow-minded. The participants also experienced a shift in self-identity with regard to manhood after their stay in urban cities. During their stay in cities, the participants engaged in the kitchen or other indoor works, which were defined as the work of females or third gender (mauga) in their homeland.

Furthermore, the growing usage of social media has also been found to alter the self-identity of participants. The participants practicing parda in their early phase 15s were involved in providing their wives with access to the internet and mobile phones., considering it a basic requirement in the changing context. This increase in mobile and internet accessibility has made public interaction easier and dismantled the practice of parda. Similarly, the local culture following the rule of avoidance also altered due to the growing use of social media. Social media has introduced a newer culture of being frank with family members which has shifted the traditional meaning of females or daughter-in-law.

There has been a role of India in promoting and educating the participants with religious education. Religious schooling and working as a religious scholar from India helped the participant to revise his earlier practiced irreligious local norms in his early 30s. The participants substituted the local practice of ghumto with the religious practice of burqa for females. Moreover, participants over 50 were also found to experiencing a shift in self-identity due to poor health and dependence on family. In this phase of life, the participants who were initially advocating for equal roles of male and female during their adulthood are now looking for daughters-in-law who can religiously take gender roles to engage in the work of caring, cooking, and properly managing the home.

### **6.3 Participants experiencing a shift in self-identity with regard to caste hood and image of Hindu-hood over the years**

In the research study, it can be found that the participants are experiencing a shift in self-identity with regards to caste-hood and the image of Hindu-hood in their inquiry over their

phases of 15s, 30s, 45, and above. The participants, in their 15s, mentioned that their identity was primarily linked to their parental background, followed by inherent characteristics of caste and religion. The participants, while sharing experiences at 15s, admitted that caste was influential in determining the occupation of participants. The participants shared their experiences of the early context, where Muslims were involved in the occupations like tailor master, butcher, dhobi, carding cotton, etc., in addition to agriculture. In the society, the lower untouchable Hindu caste (Dalits) had their own residential areas away from other non-Dalits. The line of differences was easily distinguishable among caste and religious groups. Despite differences, the participants shared that they were in a tie with a closer kinship-type relationship with Hindus. Also, there was a culture of setting *yaarji* (best friends between males) and *sakhi* (best friends between females) between two families based on the image of familial background in the locality rather than existing religious differences.

There can be traced a shift in the self-identity with regard to caste-hood and the image of Hindu-hood after the later phase of the 15s, and onward that altered the early constructed identity due to growing interference of nation-state over local contents. The participants shared that their growing identity as Nepali during their government schooling changed several earlier prevailing narratives in the locality. The participants admitted that the increasing pride in Nepali identity fostered the ‘we feelings’ among nationals despite their religious, caste, or other differences. The participants acknowledged the changes in the meaning and interpretation of cow and *Dashain* after they attached them to the national identity. While sharing the experience, the participants stated that they cultivated the feeling of worship and respect for cows as ‘our national animal,’ which contradicted the religious interpretation of symbolizing Muslims as ‘beef eaters.’

Similarly, the participants' shift in self-identity can be outlined due to their stay within educational contexts. The participants argued about their changes in identity with regard to caste and the image of Hindus after their enrollment in government schooling and education-led workplaces. The participants shared how a newer context set by education brought individuals from diverse backgrounds to a commonplace, resulting in friendship among heterogeneous backgrounds. In this context, educational qualifications determined status and

employment, and the educational system promoted a feeling of equality among diverse groups. In addition, participants shared that the commonplace of schooling and workplaces also changed several earlier religious beliefs and practices. The participants stated that they became tied with a common speaking of the Nepali language and wearing pant-shirts. The earlier religious beliefs of perceiving the color of the Holi festival as napaak (impure) for Muslims found less space after the common practice among students to celebrate festivals like Holi and Dashain became usual rituals in government schools. The next change that participants pointed out was the increasing culture of sharing dining among colleagues from diverse backgrounds, which blurred caste and religious lines. Also, sharing meat during Bakar-Eid became common among Hindu friends, which was previously considered irreligious among participants.

Likewise, the study shows that participants' self-identity regarding caste and Hindu image were reshaped by urban and foreign contexts. The participants, in their 30s and 45s, shared their experience of staying away from their homeland, which they mentioned became common due to increasing access to transportation facilities. The participants who visited and stayed in urban and foreign contexts mentioned the grooming culture of restaurants and renting in cities. For the participants staying in the rent during work in cities found themselves in a different context than that of their locality. This context exposed the participants to sharing a room and kitchen among friends with similar occupations but with diverse identical backgrounds. This led to the participants practicing a common homogenous culture despite prevailing differences in caste and religion. The participants found it challenging to maintain the line between halaal and non-halaal meats after sharing a kitchen and visiting restaurants with friends in cities. In a similar way, practicing the ritual of fasting during Ramjaan in a rented room with friends from diverse backgrounds also became challenging compared to the family environment in the locality. The participants also included the grooming culture of parties and celebrations among friends with common food items, including alcoholic products, which are forbidden in Islam.

The study reveals that the participants are experiencing a shift in self-identity regarding caste and their image of Hindus due to the growing influence of social media and mainstream Indian news channels. While sharing their recent experiences, at their age above 45, the participants mentioned the changing of the context with the sharp divide in the name of Hindus and

Muslims. The participants pointed out that the role of hate speeches from social media and mainstream media in India, mainly after the emergence of Modi in India, had redefined the meaning of Muslim identity and their relationship with Hindus. In this changing context, the participants mentioned how they developed a vocal and aggressive nature toward Hindus, which involved their experiencing the feeling of otherization by Hindus.

#### **6.4 Participants experiencing a shift in self-identity with regard to Nepalihood and Madhesi-hood over the years**

The research study discloses the shifting in self-identity of participants with regard to Nepalihood and Madhesi-hood over the years. In their early 15s, participants expressed their connection to the local context through their alignment with the Bhojpuri language and traditional male attire of dhoti-kurta-gamcha. In their phase of government schooling during the 15s and onward, they experienced their Nepali identity in correspondence with the learning of the Nepali language. This feeling of Nepali identity, as expressed by participants, dissolved their local and religious characteristics, with a common dressing of pant-shirts.

In phase 45 and above, during the context of the Madhesh movement, the participants identified themselves as ‘Madhesi’ different from Pahadi. This identity of Madhesi was formed by the splitting of earlier single Nepali identity into two contrasting categories of Madhesi and Pahadi. The participants' experience of Madhesi Nepali was different from their early Nepali identity as the Madhesi identity attached to Nepali prioritized the recognition based on local characteristics. This phase revived the local culture, where participants expressed pride in Bhojpuri over the Nepali language. The post phase of the movement also resulted in and popularized the use of gamchha, their parent’s dress. However, in the later phase during the coronavirus pandemic, participants shared about a hateful atmosphere for Muslims propagated by Indian mainstream media, which split Madhesi identity into religious lines of Hindus and Muslims. The participants who were engaged in the Madhesi movement together with non-Pahadi Hindus experienced being alienated due to the growing feeling of otherization and discrimination from a religious basis.

The participants, in their phase of 30s and 40s, also experienced a shift in self-identity with regard to Nepalihood and Madhesi-hood due to the changes in context introduced by urbanization and foreign employment. While working in the urban cities of Nepal, participants in their 30s and 40s, particularly in the hilly areas, shared an experience of feeling inferior towards the Bhojpuri language due to the dominance of the Nepali language with Pahadi influence. Participants reported that this experience instilled a sense of Madhesi identity within them. Similarly, the participant experiencing foreign employment shared that the national identity of Nepali became dominant in the foreign land with different nationalities. In the foreign context, the participants mentioned that the presence of different nationals created the feeling of inferiority as Nepali nationals and led to recognition as Nepali. The participant further stated that there were notable differences among the same religious groups with different nationalities in a foreign land, which led him to identify as a proud Nepali Muslim rather than simply a Muslim.

## **Conclusion**

The study demonstrates the fluid nature of the identity of Muslims, which changes over time and in different social structures. This research resembles the line claiming identity as a social and historical product. The Muslim identity under scrutiny shows that the identity changes continuously. There is no fixity or permanence to the identity differences or boundaries. In a similar way to the interpretation of Mishra (2011), the study also demonstrates that identity meanders, enters into rapids, and then meanders again where the identity is not the same as it started. The research findings also reflect how Barth's attempt to link identity with social process and constructivism is significant to understanding the identity line of orientation. The study dislocates itself from the anthropological literature that claims the identity (ethnic group) as largely biologically self-perpetuating. The historical account of Muslim identity shows identity as changing, in-the-making, and human endeavors disregarding the role of 'blood' or 'semen' in identity construction.

The research study also incorporates and verifies the argument proposed by Anderson (1983) and Nairn (1977), who stress the significance of the nation-state in the present context. The changes in Muslim identity due to the influence of the nation-state illustrate how the role of

the nation-state has become dominant in shaping the identity. The inculturation and acculturation of Muslims into the local and national contexts allowed them to enter the debate of Madhesi and Pahadi. The local context assigned them the proper fitting of Madhesi identity. However, during the participants' educational enrollment in government schools, the influence of the Nepali state alters the local culture with national cultures, like speaking and internalizing the Nepali language as their language over the local and mother tongue language of Bhojpuri. The shift in identity from local to national influence, followed by the national context of identity politics, encouraged the participants to take the side of Madhesi in the divide of Madhesi-Pahadi. Similarly, the context of government schools and the working spheres of government schooling also dismantled several earlier local religious beliefs. The participants who engaged in closer kinship marriage dominant in the early context within the Muslim community, in the later phase, described the marriage practice as shameful and unscientific. Moreover, the participants, in the later phase of their lives, after becoming aware of the law of the nation, interpreted the earlier age of marriage and the practice of polygamy as illegal practices that were allowable in their early local religious context.

As Wallerstein (2004) noted, the influential factor shaping the Muslim identity is also beyond the nation-state. The research findings show a direct impact of India and other Islamic states in shaping the identity. The influence of the global world and nation-state has directly affected the local religious Muslim-hood of participants through social media, modern schooling, and easy travel at national and international levels. The interpretations of participants experiencing the recent divide between Hindu-Muslim after the emergence of Modi in India show how the participants' early identity as Madhesi was weakened and split into Bhojpuri-speaking Hindus and Bhojpuri-speaking Muslims who were together as Madhesi during the Madhes movement. Similarly, the growing influence of science and technology questioned and replaced many of the early practiced religious norms and values. The findings show that the participants, in their early phase with a local religious context, found it religious and acceptable to practice religiously loaded practices such as going for the larger size of children, opposing family planning, practicing polygamy, *purdah* practice, closer kinship marriage, etc. However, after their interaction within the modern educational context, the same participants defined those earlier practices as the culture of illiterate Muslims. The Muslims working interacted with the

modern and scientific educational context defined themselves as literate Muslims who go against larger family sizes or closer kinship marriages.

The participants experienced their identification and recognition as Madhesi get sharpened after their shift away from their homeland, in an urban context, in the interaction with Pahadi groups. This follows the line of Chai (1996), who expressed how the creation of ethnic identities is determined by migration at population centers ongoing through modernizing structural changes. In a similar way, the participants involved in foreign employment mentioned how belongingness as Nepali became the only way of recognition after the issue of nation-state became dominant over religion on foreign soil. In this interpretation, the importance of the nation-state in identity-shaping is found. In this way, the identity is the product of social processing that changes in the time continuum.

The study opposes the foundation of contemporary political debate that locates Tarai Muslims in binary categorization. The line of the orientation of politics takes an essentialist orientation and searches for a suitable positioning of Tarai Muslims in either a Muslim category or a Madhesi category. The research exposes how the Muslims, at the age of 45, during the Madhesh movement, were deliberately involved in the movement with their recognition as Madhesi. The Muslims were engaged as Madhesi together with other Bhojpuri-speaking Hindus in the movement. The participants' local context influencing their dress and language pushed them to identify themselves as Madhesi rather than Nepali-speaking Pahadi. However, the same participants who stood together as Madhesi split in the name of Hindu-Muslim with the growing Hindu-Muslim divide in India, especially after the emergence of BJP and Modi. The findings suggest how the participants who were willing to sacrifice their lives for recognition and dignity as Madhesis later distanced themselves from that identity. This shows the flow of identity of Tarai Muslims from Muslim- Madhesi to pure Muslim in the time-structure. Therefore, it will be misleading to make a binary classification for Tarai Muslims and the mechanism of fluidity needed into consideration.

## References

- Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso.
- Barth, F. (1998). *Ethnic groups and boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*. Waveland Press.
- Bhattachan, K. B. (2009). Discourses on Social Exclusion and Inclusion in Nepal: Old Wine in a New Bottle! *Identity and Society Social Exclusion and Inclusion in Nepal. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point and Social Inclusion Research Fund (SIRF)*, 11, 11-43.
- Brubaker, R. (1992). *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany*. Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. D. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. University of Chicago Press.
- Burghart, R. (1984). The Formation of the Concept of Nation-state in Nepal, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 101-125.
- Central Bureau of Statistics. (2011). *National Population and Housing Census 2011*. Government of Nepal. <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/census/documents/Nepal/Nepal-Census-2011-Vol1.pdf>
- National Statistics Office. (2021). *National Population and Housing Census 2011*. Government of Nepal. [https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/results/files/result-folder/National%20Report\\_English.pdf](https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/results/files/result-folder/National%20Report_English.pdf)
- Chai, S. K. (1996). A Theory of Ethnic Group Boundaries. *Nation and Nationalism*, 2 (2), 281-307.
- Fisher, J. F. (2011, April 22-25). Reification and Plasticity in Nepalese Ethnicity. In Mishra, C. & Gurung, O. *Ethnicity and Federalization in Nepal*. [Symposium]. Kathmandu:

- Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Tribhuvan University.
- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry*, 8(4), 777–795.  
<https://doi.org/10.1086/448181>
- Gaborieau, M. (1989). Muslims in the Hindu Kingdom of Nepal. In T.N. Madan (Ed.),  
*Muslim communities of South Asia: culture, society, and power*.
- Gautam, T. R. (2015). How Homogenous are Bahuns? *Contribution to Nepalese Studies*,  
 42(1):145-166.
- Gellner, E. (1983). *Nation and nationalism*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Gellner, N. D. (2012). Fluidity, Hybridity, Performativity: How relevant are Social-  
 Scientific Buzzwords for Nepal's Constitution-Building. In Mishra, C. & Gurung,  
 O. *Ethnicity and Federalization in Nepal* (pp.91-102). Kathmandu: Central  
 Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Tribhuvan University.
- Gelner, D., Pfaff-Czarnecka, J., & Whelpton, J. (1996). *Nationalism and Ethnicity in a  
 Hindu Kingdom: The Politics and Culture of Contemporary Nepal*. London:  
 Routledge.
- Greenfeld, L. & Eastwood, J. (2005). Nationalism in Comparative Perspective. In Janoski,  
 T. et al (ed.) *The Handbook of Political Sociology: States, Civil Societies, and  
 Globalization* (pp. 247-65). England: Cambridge University Press.
- Gubhaju, B. (1999). The Fluidity of Ethnicity: The Case of Nepali and Newar Identity  
 in the United States. *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, 26 (1), pp.135-149.
- Gurung, O. (2012). Evolution of Indigeneity, Identity and Autonomy in Federal  
 Nepal. In Mishra, C. & Gurung, O. *Ethnicity and Federalization in Nepal*  
 (pp.193-209). Kathmandu: Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology,  
 Tribhuvan University.
- Hayden, R. M. (1992). Constitutional Nationalism in the Formerly Yugoslav Republic's.  
*Slavic Review*, 51 (4), 654-73.

- Hofer, A. (1979). *The Caste Hierarchy and the State in Nepal: A Study of the Mulki Ain of 1854*. Lalitpur: Himal Books.
- Kuper, A. (2003). Return of the Native. *Current Anthropology*, 44(3), 389-402.
- Luintel, Y. R. (2018). *Caste and Society: Changing dynamics of inter-caste relations in Nepal*. Academic Book Center.
- Malagodi, M. (2013). *Constitutional Nationalism and Legal Exclusion: Equality, Identity Politics, and Democracy in Nepal*. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press.
- Mills, C. W. (2000). *The sociological imagination*. Oxford University Press.
- Mishra, C. (2011, April 22-25). Ethnic Upsurge in Nepal: Implication for Federalization. In Mishra, C. & Gurung, O. *Ethnicity and Federalization in Nepal*. [Symposium]. Kathmandu: Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Tribhuvan University.
- Mishra, C., & Gurung, O. (Eds.). (2012). *Ethnicity and Federalism in Nepal* (1st ed.). Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology.
- Nagel, J. (1994). Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Re-Creating Ethnic Identity and Culture. *Social Problems*, 41(1), 152-176.
- Nairn, T. (1977). *The Break-up of Britain*. London: New Left Books
- National Planning Commission. (2014). *Nepal Human Development Report 2014: Beyond Geography, Unlocking Human Potential*. Government of Nepa.  
[https://www.npc.gov.np/images/category/NHDR\\_Report\\_2014.pdf](https://www.npc.gov.np/images/category/NHDR_Report_2014.pdf)
- Neuman, L. W. (2015). *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Pearson India Education Services.
- Norval, A. J. (2004). The Politics of Ethnicity and Identity. In K. N. Scott, *The Blackwell Companion to Political Sociology*. MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Seddon, D. (2017). *The Muslims of Nepal*. Ganpati Bhawan, Ansari Road: Adoit Publishers.
- Sijapati, B. (2012). Political Integration and Multiculturalism in Democratic Societies: The

Case of Muslim in *Naya Nepal*. In Mishra, C. & Gurung, O. *Ethnicity and Federalization in Nepal* (pp.17-36). Kathmandu: Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Tribhuvan University.

Sijapati, M. A. (2011). *Islamic Revival in Nepal: Religion and a new nation*. London and New York: Routledge.

Subedi, M. & Gautam, T.R. (2016). How Homogeneous are the Madhesis? Implications for the Inclusive and Affirmative Agendas. *Journal of Development and Administrative Studies*, 24(1-2), 1-14. DOI:[10.3126/jodas.v24i1-2.19665](https://doi.org/10.3126/jodas.v24i1-2.19665)

Upadhyay, P. (2014). *Social Ethnography of Hill Muslims of Nepal*. Ganpati Bhawan, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi : Adroit Publishers.

Wallerstein, I. (2004). *World-systems Analysis: An Introduction*. Duke University Press.

Wimmer, A. (2008). The making and unmaking of ethnic boundaries: A multilevel process theory. *American Journal of Sociology*, 970-1022.

## Annex 1

### Life History of Informants

#### Field Data

There is a follow-up of the changes in the self-identity of participants at different phases of their lives. The substantive changes at different life stages are divided into age categories of 15, 30, 45, and above 50. In the procedure, there is tracking of the corresponding changes in the self-identity with regard to Muslimhood, Muslim manhood, Muslim womanhood, Madhesihood, and images of Hinduhood.

#### 1. A Tailor Master

Nayeem Miya (65), a changed name and a tailor-master in the Kalaiya market, was interviewed. In the present scenario, he lives with his wife, two sons, daughters-in-law, and six grandchildren. This constitutes 12 members of the family. It has been more than four decades since he has been operating his tailoring shop in the market. In this long period, he has experienced several changes in the dimensions of self-identity, family, and entire profession.

#### Life sketch at 15's

Miya (65) pictured the living context of his early childhood phase around the age of 15s. He was the youngest son among six surviving children (out of nine) of Amjad Miya and Kalima Khatun. His father was married to a daughter of a renowned religious figure from Bhelahi (India). While describing the religious environment of his family, he mentioned that his father was a religious figure in the locality who was involved in treating people through *duwa-tabeez* (religious ways of treatment). Similarly, his mother (Kalima Khatun) as a housewife, was a strict follower of religious rituals (five times *namaaz* and *roja*). In addition to working in the house, his mother had been also assisting in agricultural work. During this phase of his life, he had been highly influenced by his parents to the religious way of living.

There was a wider space for religion in his family, which followed a direct intervention of religious beliefs in dealing with most of the issues like family size, marriage patterns, health, and productivity in farming. By highlighting his own reference to the past, he mentioned that it was common in the family to go for the larger family size following the practice of polygamy. He also reflected the higher influence of religion through the description of an event as,

In those periods, there were the chances of *sukha* and *Akal* (*lack of food grain due to drought leading to an untimely death*) among people. The ultimate rainfall was the only choice of farming. This led to dependence on prayers for rainfall. Rice was considered a food grain for rich people's meals, while roti (bread) of makai (maize) and maduwa were common among all.

His family's economic status did not allow him to carry out his studies either in modern or religious schools. At the very early age of around 12, he started visiting the tailoring shops of his relatives in the nearby market area, where he learned tailoring skills. In a way, he had been comparatively departed away from his parent's profession of religious and agricultural line. He has the mother tongue of Bhojpuri, and all his friends from his childhood share the same language. His early surrounding neighbors were of caste groups like Koiri, Kanu, and Yadav. In his childhood phase, he remembered the context with fewer homes in the localities. The people around had closer ties and mutual dependence with each other. Most people were common in their occupation with an engagement in agriculture. In the same way, the people had the common dress of *dhoti-kurta-gumcha* or *kurta-pajama-gumcha* for

men and *sari-blouse-sameez* (sameez bigger than blouse) for women. They were also aligned with a common sharing of a language of Bhojpuri. However, there were “silent segregations” in the localities in the name of caste, languages, religion, and culture. He recalled those contexts as,

Previously, the differences in society were manifested in several ways. The majority of people were Bhojpuri language speakers, and there were localities other than Bhojpuri speakers. For example, the Marwadi community speaks Hindi and lives around the market areas, while the Pahadi community speaks Nepali and shares their own locality recognized as Pahadi tole. Similarly, there were also different localities for lower castes such as Chamarpati and Doom-basti, who live away from other Non-Dalit Hindu castes. In the locality, Muslims also share the Non-Dalit Hindu localities, who were Bhojpuri speakers. Similarly, Muslims were also identified by the nature of their work in accordance with caste belonging within Muslims. The distinct works of Muslims of our localities were as tailor master, butcher, dhobi, carding cotton, etc., that differentiate them from Muslims and other Bhojpuri-speaking Hindus.

He further argued that these kinds of segregation were accepted by every individual in society. Despite these divisions, the people were close to each other and cooperating during times of need.

### **Life sketch at 30's**

Miya (65) was married at the age of 19 when the age of his wife was 15 years. He was married in a family of closer kinship. His wife (Nasima Khaton) had not attained any kind of schooling; however, she became religiously aware of Islamic rituals from her husband's family orientation. She had been handling work from home and had also handled the farming work of her own. While looking after farms, she had also been keeping goats for additional income.

During this phase, he opened a new wooden *ghumti* shop (a small shop made up of furniture) in the market. While he was there, he started wearing a new fashion trend, a pant-shirt, which was different from his usual traditional attire of dhoti-kurta. However, he still kept a beard following religious guidelines, just like his father. On holy days like Friday or religious festivals, he would dress traditionally, either in lungi or kurta, to mark the occasion as a religious day for Muslims. During this phase, he remembered how his orientation towards health issues changed after his stay in the market. He recalled the mixed strategy where the family members were jointly consulted with the religious scholars as well as the hospital during the time of sickness. In the case of health-related issues, he says,

Previously, health-related issues were treated inside the home from the consultation of different religious scholars. The single curing process was *duwa-tabeez*, while the context of the market was different. There were several groups of people in the market who were insisting on the visit of hospitals rather than religious scholars. The market provided the space where people with different ideas were visiting and providing contrasting suggestions from relatives or neighbors.

In similar ways, he also mentioned how the initial dependence on religious faiths in terms of agriculture was shifted with changing time phases. The family (his wife looking after farms, which became smaller after the partition) started the use of fertilizers, insecticides, pesticides, and modern equipment like tractors and water for agriculture that had replaced the possibility of drought or other causes of crop failure.

He recalled several changes after he set up a shop in the market. During his stay in the market, he became closer to the *Marwardi* caste with clothes shops in the market. In this process, he also became familiar with the Hindi language over time. Similarly, the closeness with *pahadi* customers also made his Nepali speaking more fluent. In the changing context and closeness to the market, he found that every parent was sending their children to modern schools. The job opportunities for educated ones were more fascinating in society, and modern education was providing a newer realm of power and

prestige. In the growing trend of education, he also admitted his elder son to the government school. In addition, the family environment was also pushing to acquire religious education. That is why, he also started sending his children for religious schooling in nearby Masjid at evening times. In this process, he accepted that learning from the market was not the same as applied to sons and daughters. He admitted that the openness promoted by modern schooling made family members uncomfortable with sending daughters to school. In this case, sons were exposed to both kinds of schooling (modern and religious), while daughters were sent only to religious schooling (that maintains *parda* and code of religion).

#### **Life sketch at 45.**

During his work tenure, he remembered a different context where some relatives and friends suggested he adopt family planning. The religious logic against family planning became the dominant cause for avoiding family planning at the initial marital stage. However, in his 40s, after the health complications (related to reproductive health) of his wife and the suggestions from a doctor, the couple decided to limit a total number of five children, comprising three daughters and two sons.

There was a growing trend of sending sons to foreign employment families. Due to the family's lower income, the elder son of Miya (65), who had passed SLC and was looking for different work than his father (with a higher income than his father), moved for foreign employment in Malaysia for three years. Foreign employment added a different dimension of recognition for the families in society. Due to earning from foreign employment, the families were finding a new zone to redefine themselves and their ways of living. Miya mentioned that the income had given stability to the family, and thus, he started giving more time to religious stuff. In this time phase, he started allocating time for Din-Islam, which insisted on his routine visits to the jammāt.

After three years of stay in Malaysia, the elder son returned back to Nepal. He married his elder son, and his daughter-in-law has attained basic modern education and religious education. He mentioned that the marriage style is not the same as it was before. There was an increasing trend in the practice of dowry among Muslims. He explains the context as,

The Muslim community has undergone changes over time, particularly in their marriage rituals. The exchange of dowry has made these practices impure, unlike before when higher marriage practices were prevalent within kinship among Muslims. In those contexts, it was common practice to carry marriage closer relatives in nearby localities, and gift-giving was negotiable and not a mandatory condition for initiating a marriage. When a close relative is directly involved in a marriage, it was prohibited to exchange dowry forcefully. However, the trend of marrying within kinship is decreasing sharply, and the healthy exchange of gifts has now taken the shape of dowry among Muslims in the present context. In fact, the initiation of a marriage cannot happen unless both sides agree to the condition of dowry.

In such context, he mentioned that he was obliged to meet the requirements of dowry while marrying her daughter. However, he added that he resisted the practice of dowry and he did not demand any dowry while marrying his son.

#### **Life sketch of 50 and above.**

During the visit of Jammāt and Taleem for training, he encouraged proper adherence to Islamic rituals and gestures within the family. The proper follow-up Islamic rituals mean regular prayers five times and full fasting in the family during the month of Ramadan. In the gesture, he changed the appearance of himself as well as his wife. He began wearing kurta-pajama with a bundi jacket and encouraged his wife to wear a suruwal-kurta-dupatta instead of a sari-blouse, which he considered a Hindu dress. The

essence of *parda* came into being for him. This is applied with strict regulation in the case of her daughter-in-law. He mentioned that the daughter-in-law keeps proper follow-up of *parda* in her life. Even after years of marriage, the daughter-in-law has not visited outdoors of her own.

In the growing graph of religious gestures in his life, there are contrasting views on some issues. He says,

Modern education has become a fundamental requirement for both boys and girls in modern times. It is crucial for girls to receive an education, given the current societal context. The traditional practice of marriage now necessitates that both genders possess an education. In the past, only boys were required to have an education or a skillset, whereas now, girls are expected to meet the same educational standards. Occupations that require education are becoming more prevalent in the community. Initially, he, as a father, was against modern schooling, which he resisted in the early phase, considering that it was irreligious and non-Islamic. However, the growing popularity and demand for modern education in the locality changed his early mindset, and he started accompanying his granddaughter to a modern school.

Similarly, he also adds,

Rearing children in the present context is not as easy as it was before. In the past, education was not compulsory for every child, and larger families were considered a symbol of strength in society. I also used to believe that having children is a gift or blessing from God. In fact, this was a commonly held belief among Muslims of our locality, who mostly resisted family planning. However, this belief may not be appropriate in today's context. With the higher economic expenditure of larger families, the larger families find it difficult to survive in today's world. The newer generation's detachment from agriculture and attraction towards modern education make it more challenging for larger families to meet present needs, and they are often considered a door to poverty. There are several factors pushing for smaller family sizes, such as the costlier access to education and healthcare, as well as dowry-derived marriage. In such a context, I always suggest having a maximum of three children for a happier life. In practice, every family, including Muslims living in the market, was adopting a trend of family planning and living their life happily. Today, I think we Muslims need to redefine ourselves to sustain the challenges of the changing context.

There have been considerable changes in the issue of identity in the last decade. Previously, there was an easy mix-up of diverse groups based on religion, caste, ethnicity, region, and other identical features in society. However, the present context has drawn a clear and bold divide in the name of *Pahadi-Madheshi* and Muslim-Hindu. He mentioned how the marker of differences between *Pahadi-Madheshi* have also been reconceptualized in terms of meaning and relationship. He describes the changes he felt after the context created by the Madhesh movement,

In the past, there was a mutually beneficial relationship between the Pahadis and Madheshis. However, the Madhesh movement changed this dynamic. During this movement, a binary categorization emerged where individuals aligned themselves with either the pro-Madheshi or anti-Pahadi sentiment. Here, I aligned myself in the pro-Madheshi and anti-Pahadi sentiments. Through this movement, it became evident that Pahadis were exploiting Madheshis and occupying the highest positions in the government. We also learned that our children were not receiving their fair share of state resources and opportunities.

He further added how he, along with his family members, forecasted the vote in the name of the Madheshi party without any detailed inquiry of the candidate of the election. The click of the earlier divide was not constant forever. There evolved the fraction within the relations among Madheshis who stood in the same space earlier. He dislocated himself away from Madheshi's identity when he suffered a sharp religious toxic divide during the time of the coronavirus pandemic. He shared that the outlooks of Hindus have changed after the emergence of Modi with

Hindutva politics in India. The demonstration, gestures, aggression, and appearances in the name of religion have become a recent trend in the practice among Hindu neighbors. This, in fact, is influenced by the mainstream news debate from Indian channels, which are continuously reporting in line with the mainstream political party of the BJP of India. In such a scenario, he feels to recognize the identity of Muslims rather than Madhesi.

## **2. A Retired Government Employee**

Sajid Mansoor (67), a changed name, is a retired government employee. His family has eight family members, including his wife, four daughters, and two sons. However, four family members remained after his daughters' marriage. The purpose of higher education and job opportunities in Kathmandu (an urban city) forced his elder son to stay away from his hometown. Similarly, the younger son stays home with his parents for his secondary level study. The younger son is also planning for his journey to a foreign country in the course of higher study.

### **Life sketch at 15's**

Sajid Mansoor stated that his early childhood phase differs in many ways from that of the present context. In this process, he explained several incidents to note about the phase of his early childhood. He remembers how the attraction towards modern education was comparatively lesser in those periods of childhood. In that context, he remembers how there was the contribution of his mother in sending him to the modern schools which was itself an innovative move for the family. For this, he argued that the neighboring families were from the Pahadi locality, and they insisted to his mother about the importance of sending children to school. Due to his family's close relationship with the Pahadi locality (the Pahadi, for them, were helpful and trustworthy and helped the families on many occasions), his mother easily convinced him to engage his sons in modern schooling. The counseling of schooling of children did not apply to daughters as the couples (his father and mother) were religiously aware of performing early marriage of the daughter.

He pictured the outlook of his father with a dhoti and a kurta. However, he never wore the same dress as his father due to the code of school to wear a shirt and pants. In his early days of schooling, he got familiar with Nepali languages, which he initially considered the language of Pahadis. Therefore, languages like Bhojpuri as a mother tongue and Nepali (learned in schools and by friends from the *Pahadi community*)—were familiar and common during his early socialization.

Similarly, he also recalls how he got closer to the syllabus of school that insisted he read Sanskrit, which he initially took as the reading contents of Hindu pandits. In contrast, he argued that the atmosphere of his locality was non-Muslim (with Hindu neighbors). During his schooling years, festivals like Dashain (which was also the Greater festival of Nepali) and Holi (the color festival) and the ways of the celebration through the organization of programs became usual for him. Initially, he kept his distance away from these festivals based on religious differences. However, his student identity made him easily adaptable to the festivals despite caring about the religious backgrounds. In the same way, he also added,

Before attending modern schooling, I used to associate puja-patha with Hindus and considered the color of Holi as napaak (impure) for Muslims. However, during my time in school, I began to celebrate Saraswati Puja, the Dashain program, and Holi festivals due to my student identity. Also, my perspective changed in relation to Saraswati worship, as she was considered the goddess of knowledge and wisdom and it was common practice within schools to perform rituals in honor of her. I also adopted the practice of touching books or any stationery items with my head and heart, a form of paying respect to books after they fell down, which included the worship of the goddess

of vidya (Saraswati). This contradicted my earlier religious beliefs, as there was a belief that restricted ideal worship and bowing down to anyone other than Allah (God).

He added that he had been closely associated with the friend circles of schools (mainly non-Muslims) and their culture (mainly Hindu culture). He further mentioned that the only mosque was far away from his home, and the atmosphere of that village (with the mosque) was also not good (in terms of children using toxic conversation and playing cards), which did not allow his parents to send the children to learn basic religious schooling.

He explains the atmosphere of his neighborhood during his early phase of childhood,

In society, there were fewer residences where almost every family knew each other and even the track record of their ancestors. The settlements were of the mixed type, consisting of different caste groups, religious groups, and Madhesi-Pahadi (except Dalits, who were settled in their own community at a distance away from home). The people residing nearby were closely familiar with each other, and there were family-type relationships despite existing differences. There was an exchange of food items among families despite their caste or religious relation (except for Dalits who stay away from the missed groups) on the basis of long held family relations.

He further shared the familial-type relationship with most of the members in the locality despite their religious affiliation. He still carries the closer relationship with his jaarji (best friend) set at his early childhood. He mentioned his jaarji in the Yadav (Hindu caste) family, where he shared a family-like bond in that family. He also disclosed the closer relation among families in the locality on the basis of family background which he describes as,

At a societal level, people, despite religious affiliation, have been living in harmony in their localities. Although they have no blood relation, they are bound together through a kinship-like relationship. They address each other in terms of closer relationships like chaha (uncle), chahi (aunty), bhैया (elder brother), didi-bahin (elder-younger sister), baba (grandfather) etc., regardless of their religious backgrounds. Similarly, there is a cultural tradition of setting jaarji (best friend between males) and sakhi (best friend between females), where the best friends share dining and other activities, forming a family-like bond. Furthermore, both religious groups (Hindu and Muslims) attend each other's funerals.

However, he also remembers that there were few families (non-pahadi Hindus) who kept a fine line from Muslims while using common wells for the purpose of drinking water. The Muslims were also using the same well for drinking water; however, they needed to make a distance away from the concrete well at the time when those families (Hindus) came to fill up the vessels of water.

### **Life sketch at 30's**

After completing his SLC degree, he decided to join the government service. He recalled how he had moved away from his family's farming occupation, which he felt was no longer attractive to young people. He also reflected on how his involvement with government employment had opened up new opportunities and dimensions for him. He acknowledged the contribution of Shastri ji (a Pahadi family), who supported him in the intake of government employment.

As a symbol of his adulthood, he sported a masculine look with a mustache. He shared that keeping a mustache was a trend among youths, and he was one of the many who followed it. He remembered how the actors in Hindi cinema (Indian cinema dominating the localities) had masculine looks and body hair. Such cinemas were accessible to a limited audience, who imitated their looks and appearances.

Similarly, he also mentioned how he got familiar with the language of Hindi after his marriage to his wife from India, who mainly communicates in Hindi languages. He also narrated the story of his marriage,

The family was looking for a good daughter-in-law with qualities like fair cooking skills within the Miya Dhuniya caste group of Muslims. In this process, they get connected with a family from India matching the requirements. My wife has not attained modern schooling however she has basic religious consciousness.

### **Life sketch at 45**

In the work tenure, he remembers how there was pressure from colleagues for family planning; however, he omitted the idea initially while waiting for the second son. He added that his mother and his wife were not in the mood to adopt family planning with only one son, but after the younger sixth child, a son, the couple adopted not for more children.

He explains how his relationship with non-Muslims became closer during his working tenure, leading to a share of every food item. He says,

During my work tenure, my Hindu colleagues started visiting my home during Bakar-Eid to enjoy meat. However, this was not always the case, as my parents used to consider it a sin to share meat with non-Muslims. In my experience of age of 15, there was practice of inviting Hindus during Eid; however, we as a Muslim opposed sharing Bakar-Eid meat with Hindus as we considered that their religious sweet (meat) can become impure if we share meat with Hindus, who can consume it with liquors (alcohol) which is considered as Haraam (impure) in Muslims.

He also mentioned how the working atmosphere compelled him to break the previous family norms,

Most of the staff at the working sites were Hindus, and we used to share dining together on a regular basis. They exchanged their festival prasads (sweets from Hindus festival) with me without any boundary distinctions. Over the years, they had become like family, standing before any other relatives due to working together for a long time. It made me uncomfortable to keep them away from our home even during Bakar-Eid. Now, we invite them to our home and share food during festivals.

During this phase of his life, he recalls a tea stall that was frequented by people of all castes and religions to discuss local and national issues. The interesting thing was that the tea glasses used by every group were indistinguishable, regardless of their caste or religion. This practice helped to break down the sharp caste-based divisions that previously existed. He mentioned that the introduction of hand pumps and tea stalls in the village further blurred the caste or religious lines that were previously drawn due to the use of wells for water. Such changes occurred as soon as hand pumps became easily accessible to every household.

He fondly remembers the time when his growing children encouraged him to adopt a more modern style of dressing, such as t-shirts, trousers, and jeans pants. He acknowledges that the gift from his children transformed his fashion sense in many ways and made it more compatible with younger generations.

### **Life sketch of 50 and above**

Mansoor (67) argued that he had a different look and appearance during his work tenure. The appearance was mainly influenced by the working atmosphere and trends in social media. He

described those appearances as:

I had a gentlemanly look (pants, shirt, and coat, with a clean-shaved look or small mustache) during my work tenure as an employee. The appearance was common at the time and was considered as a standard look. In the work tenure, the religious belief advocating for a bigger size of beard (in Islamic belief, the beard is considered as sunnat) cannot be comfortable among diverse group staff. Also, I changed my appearance in accordance with the time period with suggestions from barbers (following social media) and colleagues. There can also be the influence of Indian cinemas to change my look from a small mustache to no mustache to a small beard and mustache.

However, after his retirement, he mentioned that his surroundings had changed. He said that he started spending most of his time at home with his family and relatives. In this phase of staying at home, he argued that his wife and other family members compelled him to follow the path of Islam at the elderly age as the preparation for Allah's home (religious involvement to please god, which works after people's death). He described the changes as:

One of my relatives took me to jamaat for one month, and things then changed. I met religious scholars and devotees from India and other Islamic countries. I received training in religious ways of life. I strictly started reading namaaz five times and fasting during Ramadan became compulsory for me. I transformed my appearance with the new practice of keeping a big beard and a small mustache with a white kurta-pajama and topi. I decided to live the remaining years of my life in the servitude of *Allah* (God). This changed me from a gentleman to a devotee of Almighty Allah.

He remembered how the food culture of his home was also changed in this long period. In the current time, several dishes were introduced during the festive days, recognizing them as Muslim foods like biryani, korma, kabaab, and kima. In this changing of food items in the kitchen, there is the role of his wife (such items were cooked in their home in India) and daughters who follow social media to learn several Muslim food items so that to serve different food items for the friends invited during festivals.

He also mentioned how there created a sharp divide among people on the basis of Nepali speakers and non- Nepali speakers distinguishing between Pahadi-Madheshi. Previously, he argued that terms like Madheshi and Pahadi took public concern only during the Holi festivals when the different groups celebrate for two consecutive days (the first day for Pahadi and the second day for Madheshi). There also started a new grammar to interpret the relationship in between Pahadi and Madheshi. Initially, he showed how there was a good family relationship with the Pahadi community with lots of respect, but after the Madhesh movement, the picture of Pahadi changed. He also shared the rise of anti-Pahadi sentiments during the Madhesh movement where he fitted himself as Madheshi.

Similarly, he also remembered how the relationship between Hindus and Muslims is not the same in these years. He admitted that he developed a way of recognizing himself as Muslim after the coronavirus pandemic. This was the time, he shared that there were negative presentations of Muslims in the Indian mainstream media, when Muslims experienced a feeling of discrimination and otherization from Hindus. The increasing distance between Muslims and Hindus, according to him, resulted in him fitting into the Muslim identity, who often engaged in debates, becoming vocal and aggressive to show his identity as superior.

### **3. A Retired Teacher and Political Activist**

Sameer Mansoor (68) is a retired teacher who spent most of the active phase of his life teaching within the Bara district. Later on, he also actively engaged in political activism. He has a total of eleven family members, including his wife, two sons, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren. His elder son is settled in

Kathmandu with his family, while the younger son is a businessman staying in his hometown in the Bara district. However, the younger son made a new home near the market for the purpose of education and easy business access. He has his settlement in either of the places with his sons staying in Bara district and Kathmandu. The normal communicative languages of his family are mainly Bhojpuri and Nepali.

### **Life sketch at 15's**

He recalls the early phase of his childhood by describing a few incidents. In the early phase, he remembers how the naming pattern in the family is different from the present time. He pointed to the names of his father and mother as Farman Miya Dhuniya and Salima Khatun Dhuniyaen (changed names). As he contemplated on how his father's time was named, he suddenly noticed the pattern of naming in his family across generations. During his early years, the family had removed the surname 'Dhuniya' as it was associated with his father's occupation of making cotton bed covers during winter. However, this surname was no longer relevant for his son who was studying in school, leading many Muslim Dhuniya parents to detach it from their children's names. Further, he explained how the trend for his son and daughter has also changed significantly. The newer generations are following the naming pattern from social media following telefilms, TV serials and so on, which omits the caste reflection from the names.

In his early childhood phase, his father was mainly engaged in agricultural work while his mother was a typical housewife. Neither of his parents (father and mother) had attained any kind of schooling in their life. In the growing influence of sending children to schools, he also initially joined modern schooling. However, in the meantime, many of his friends left the schooling for the purpose of learning working skills. The same case did not apply to him due to his good educational performance. The teachers (mainly from reputed families in the locality) motivated his family to give continuity for higher education. In the early days, he was also visiting the mosques for basic schooling of Islamic codes. However, because of the irregularity of religious scholars and lack of higher schooling in the religious line in the nearby areas, he was forced to discontinue his religious schooling. The circumstances made his modern schooling favorite over religious learning. In narrating the story of his entry into education, he also focuses on the differences when he adds,

I noticed that the trend of education was not the same for my sisters as it was for me. They were married off early due to religious and societal pressures. Because of religious reasons, my sisters were not allowed to attend co-educational schools due to the practice of purdah. Society also frowned upon unmarried girls, and it was believed that the longer they remained unmarried, the more it would bring shame to the family. Even I was not in the line to allow our girls to go outdoors due to societal pressure and the belief that the females in our family were related to our family's prestige. During those times, the Pahadi community was different as they allowed their sons and daughters to marry later in life. We considered the Pahadi community to be different from us in this cultural practice.

During his childhood phase, he remembered diverse groups of people living in solidarity. In those contexts, there was no trend of questioning the constitution of society based on caste or religion. The group of people with inherent identity were engaged in their occupation mainly following the line of path of their parents. However, when he visualized those scenarios with the present ongoing lens of conflict, he found several silent hierarchies in that society mainly based on the criteria of birth. However, those hierarchies were accepted among the people.

He remembers the past when there were defined hierarchies among Muslims on the basis of caste lines. He remembers the common proverb, “ka ho Jolaha k nokar Pathan?” that is, ‘Can the Pathans be the servant of Ansari?’ which means Pathans lie upper in the hierarchy than jolaha (Ansari). In that phase,

he also mentioned his awareness of caste and acceptance of the caste and religious linings. This proverb reflects how there was practiced hierarchy on the basis of caste among Muslims. By picking the same line, he also remembers how there is no marriage practice from the higher Muslim caste to the lower Muslim caste.

He also recalls how there was an influence of Hindu caste system among Muslims. He mentioned that Dalits were considered non-touchable by both Muslims and non-Dalit Hindus. Non-Dalit Hindus, as well as Muslims, practiced food and water restrictions from Dalits. He showed that Dalit residences were located far away from Muslims and other non-Dalit Hindu castes. The non-Dalit Hindu, mainly Bhojpuri speaking, caste had easy acceptability with Muslims in many cases, except for certain festivals like Chattha, which demanded a higher notion of purity and pollution.

He mentioned that religious Islamic values also distanced him from Dalits. He added that the occupation of the Dom (a Dalit caste) of rearing pigs made them untouchable for Muslims due to religious beliefs regarding pigs (religiously, pigs are a sin for Muslims). He added how his identity was recognized as a 'kisan-gerahat' or 'farmer' due to the traditional occupation of agriculture in the family. In this context, he remembered a common proverb from the early phase that targets Dalits: "Chammar k sarapla se girhat k bail marela?" It means that the farmer's plowing ox does not die due to the curse from lower castes like Chamar.

He was married during his college studies. The family members selected the daughter-in-law, and the marriage was arranged due to the pressure from the mother. In fact, he insisted on his parents for the delay of the marriage like other Pahadi groups; however, the parents followed the early practice like in other Muslim communities and other non-pahadi Hindus. He says that there was no space for arguments for children once the parent made decisions for them. He stated that his marriage was arranged within the close family kinship which he regarded common cases.

### **Life sketch at 30's**

In the later phase of their college days, he was attracted to national politics with an inclination towards Communist Ideology. They have a team (educated friends mainly from upper castes of pahadis and non-pahadis) supporting this ideology, and they were raising questions over several superstitions, including the relevance of religion. In this phase, the ideology of communism was at its peak point in the educational context. He had dislocated himself from all kinds of religious backups. Moreover, there has been a negative glance towards religion during those years. he recalls an incident as.

There has developed a habit of questioning religion to religious scholars. In fact, the religious scholars were threatened by our team due to our habit of questioning on existence of religion. The religious scholars (Muslim or Hindu) tagged us as *saitaan* or *kaafir* due to our nature of distracting away from the religious norms. The mosques or temples had become a faraway subject for us. The red color as a symbol of revolution was the only sort of recognition for us.

After the completion of his college studies, he joined the occupation of teaching. In fact, the influence of one of his Pahadi gurus (teacher) helped him to grasp the job. He remembers that there were separate categories of friends (with common ideological orientations) sharing the dining. The earlier practice of caste and religion were not dominant while the educated ones were making separate groupings. He mentioned that the practice of caste-based discrimination was not considered a rational and modern practice among the educated groups, and he resisted such kinds of ongoing practice as an educated person.

### **Life sketch at 45's**

He argued the educational atmosphere provided him with the ability to challenge several earlier practices. This made him comfortable to break the religious notion by adopting family planning and enrolling daughters in co-education. In this phase, he mentioned how he became aware of treating sons and daughters equally, which contradicted his earlier religious orientation that differentiated the roles of girls and boys. He labeled those Muslims as traditional and illiterate who resisted the modern schooling of daughters. In this phase, he started sending his daughters to schools, which was a revolutionary step for the Muslims of his locality. His orientations towards the communist ideology, educational context, and the common practice among Pahadi to send daughters for modern schooling—were the reasons he included that pushed him to make a decision to send daughters to schools. He shared that the *Pahadi share a good image among Muslims, non-Pahadis Hindu*, and overall society. Similarly, he also adopted family planning after he had four children. Initially, he was planning a family planning after three children, but his wife was uncertain about the survival chances of the children and waited for two sons and two daughters in this course.

During his teaching days, he remembers that every staff member celebrated almost every festival with easy ways of acceptability with each other. Initially, he recalled how the use of color during the days of Holi was considered unholy for Muslims in the Muslim locality and even in his family; however, this practice has become common due to the changing working context and his flexible orientation towards religion. In addition, he mentioned that the rest of the staff in the schools called him ‘Nastik,’ and he was comfortable with such recognition. However, he mentioned that his religious orientation and revolutionary ideas were not easily accepted by the family. He further adds,

Most of the family members were not standing in the line in which I was standing. There was regular opposition from my wife and the parents, who have strong faith in religion; however, I was not following the guidelines directed by them. Moreover, I was also not forcing the rest of the family members to join in the line in which I believed. In this way, there were several contradictions in the functioning of the family.

### **Life sketch at 50 and above**

In this phase of his life, he admitted how the changing national context with emerging issues of identity politics at national politics created a sharp divide between Pahadi and Madhesi. In that context, he shared that he recognized himself with Madhesi and actively raised his voice for the rights of Madhesi, which he narrates, “We Madhesis were cheated by Pahadis, the rulers of Nepal. The top-most posts at governmental levels were captured by Pahadi. They exploited over Madhesi.” This way of identifying himself, according to him, distanced away from the Pahadi, which subjected a feeling of hatred for Pahadi. He also described the influence of this movement in this gesture as,

During the movement, I began adding a traditional garment known as gumchha to my usual attire of pants and shirts. Previously, I had thought of gumchha as an outdated attire that our parents used to wear or I considered it as the dress of dehati (illiterate villagers) who engage in agriculture. However, the movement instilled a sense of pride in our Madhesi identity, which included embracing our local customs and traditional dress. This was also the time when I started speaking Bhojpuri with pride among my peers and formed my own social circles that were separate from the Pahadi groups. For me, we Madhesis were the historically suffered category who were exploited by the Pahadi. The sentiment and feeling of being Madhesi were so strong inside me that I participated in the Madhesh movement without fear of death from the police who opposed the movement.

In the later phase, after the election and the victory of the Madhesi parties, he realized that the politics

of identity and division between Madhesi and Pahadi communities were being concentrated for the benefit of a few caste groups. He observed that the Madhesi parties were also engaging in caste politics. Consequently, he distanced himself from Madhesi's identity-based activism. Despite this, he still believes that the issue of Madhesi closely relates to the sentiments of several people like him.

In addition, he showed that the feeling of being Muslim and religious sentiments also became dominant with the ages. Mainly after recovering from the health-threatening disease, he turned toward religious beliefs. He argues, 'It is how life goes. The ultimate truth is the religion and family who always live with you from birth to death.' Moreover, he also added that the divide between Hindus and Muslims has increased due to the influence of Hindutva politics from India and the influence of mainstream media injecting the feeling of hatred among people. He showed how he, himself, witnessed the feeling of otherization from his own colleagues who once stood together for the rights of Madhesi. He mentioned that the feeling of Hinduism has become sharpened among people around him who initially stood together as Madhesi, and this has increased distance among people with growing feeling of Hindu-Muslim.

With smile in his face, he showed the present gesture which consists of kurta, paiaja and red *gamchha*. He says that he has the sentiments of communist, and Madhesi sentiment in his life. Here, he argued that the religious cause motivates him to wear a kurta-pajama while gumcha is the demonstration of his Madhesi identity while the red color is the symbol he took from communist schooling as the symbol of revolution. Similarly, he has also been a regular visitor to the mosque, which he mentioned provided him with a greater level of satisfaction. In this phase of life, he is learning a new way of living with his beliefs in a religious way. However, he admitted that there appear to be several changes due to the increasing influence of modern education in his societal context. The changes in the context, according to him, has normalized the co-education and modern schooling of daughters. He said that the impact of government jobs after the adaptation of quotas (reservations for Women, Madhesi, and Muslims) have also energized Muslim parents to send their daughters to school. He says,

At present, enrolling the children (granddaughter) in the finest modern English boarding schools has become a matter of pride. Previously, co-education was not accepted in society, and the Muslim community was mainly against such practices. However, the scene is not the same as the current scenario, as the parents are hunting for good modern schooling. In fact, modern educational qualifications have become one of the dominant criteria for conducting arranged marriages for both boys and girls.

He mentioned how the project of education got wider currency among Muslim daughters after the implementation of quota provision at the governmental level. He argues, 'In fact, the center of attraction for every family is the attainment of the government employment and the achievement of government level employment is comparatively easier for girls than for boys.' While interpreting the significance of education, he further recalled an incident where there managed to arrange a marriage in the family with a common consensus with Hawari (Dhobi) caste (lower caste than Mansoori). The reason behind the move was the education and employment of the daughter-in-law. In this way, he said that modern education and government employment have dissolved the issue of caste criteria in the marital process, which was important previously among Muslims. In the current context, he also relates those earlier commonly accepted comments based on caste and sex as offensive, marking them as casteist and sexist comments. however, that was easily acceptable among people previously.

Similarly, he also added that he is not in favor of close-kinship marriage, and so are most educated Muslims. He provided scientific logic to reject such practices from his family. He added that offspring in the closer kinship crossing will not be hybrid (quality reproduction).

#### 4. A Religious Scholar

In the interview with Salamudin Ansari (68), he revealed several changes in different dimensions of his life over the years. He showed how his perception of religious education, family nature, culture, and religious beliefs have changed with time. Similarly, he also discussed his involvement in polygamy with a second marriage. In his words, while reminding the past, he expressed that there was normalization in carrying out early marriage, polygamy, or having a larger number of children.

##### Life sketch at 15's

Salamudin Ansari (68), a changed name, is the son of Maharzan Ansari and Salma Begum (changed parents' names). His parents were primarily engaged in agriculture. He shared that his family was economically poor. He mentioned that his parents, like many others in the locality, did not want their children to pursue farming as an occupation. Farming, according to him, is becoming unpopular for the newer generation in his early phase of age of 15. He added that either education or working in cities was getting popular among the youth. In that context, he mentioned that his family allowed him to pursue religious schooling in India. Ansari narrates the context of his decision to move for religious schooling as,

I am the elder son of my parents. My family was motivated by one of the religious scholars (Moulbi) who visited the mosque of his village for Jamaat. The Moulbi convinced my parents to pursue religious study, and he (moulbi) further reflected on the benefit of how the parents managing their children for religious study are sent directly to heaven. Moreover, he (Moulbi) also informed my parents about the provision of free feeding and settlement in the religious school of India, which allowed my parents to choose the option of religious schooling for me.

However, he mentioned that his younger brother's context did not attract him or his family to pursue religious studies. According to him, his brother was learning tailoring skills, which was the typical choice for most Muslim children during that time. He also mentioned that since tailoring provided the opportunity for early earning, it was opted as a suitable option for his younger brother from the family.

During the early years of religious schooling, he mentioned that his clothing became more influenced by the Muslim culture around his schooling context. He mentioned that he started dressing in traditional kurta-kameez and wearing a topi (a Muslim head covering cap), which set him apart from many of his childhood friends, both Muslim and Hindu. Despite previous similarities between his family and their neighbors of different religions, he shared that his involvement in religious schooling created a feeling of division in the name of Hindus and Muslims within him. He said, "I started visualizing Hindus as different from us, Muslims, and this created a feeling of others for Hindus." He also used the term "Kafir" for non-Muslims. He also added his learning of Urdu languages, dress up patterns, and orientation towards religion departed him from his earlier friend circles.

He did not remember the exact age of his marriage as it was conducted in the early childhood phase with his close relative. However, in his early 20s, he was gone with the marriage ceremony of Gauna when his bride came home for the first time. His wife was approximately 15 years old, and she came for the first time after Gauna. He also mentioned that his wife had not attained any kind of schooling; however, she was well aware of performing daily five times religious prayers due to her upbringing in an Islamic-aware family.

He described the procedure of commonly operated marriage ceremonies in their time as,

The marriage was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, during very early childhood, the marriage was performed through a nikah ceremony. However, in the second phase, the bride only

moved to the husband's home after they had reached a certain age, which is also known as Gauna. During Gauna, the bride's family sent her to her husband's home with certain gifts.

He recalled those processes of Gauna as similar to that of Hindu religious groups. However, the negotiation of gifts for Muslims was flexible since the marriage was mainly accomplished among close relatives. By recalling the period, he mentioned that there was easy processing of marriage since either of the families closely knows each other and the marriage is operated in a nearby location. He gave the logic behind selecting the nearby locations for marriage as,

There was no access to transportation anywhere like in the present context. There was provision for palki (the palki signifies the bride carrying a basket during the wedding from four ends by four persons in two opposite directions) for carrying the newly married bride to her husband's home. Such ceremonies demanded a nearby location for the marriage.

### **Life sketch at 30's**

In the process of working in different mosques, he visited several nearby areas. In this early phase of his profession, he mentioned that he found highly respectful atmospheres. He says, "Previously, this religious profession was highly dignified, and the people had easy trust in religious scholars for several purposes. Similarly, the earlier payments were also sufficient to sustain the family". He mentioned how, in the earlier context, the issues of health were dealt with within the scope of religion. He describes the context as,

During sickness, it was common for people to seek advice from religious scholars, which created an opportunity to earn money through the skilled practice of duwa-tabeez. The respected Muslim scholars were able to attract believers from both Hindu and Muslim religions. As a result, people frequently visited religious institutions and scholars, leading to a prosperous life for religious scholars and their families in terms of both finances and prestige.

While sharing his experience, he mentioned how his religious education had changed his perception of Muslim women. Initially, women in his family didn't wear burqas and had more freedom to move around outdoors. However, he later revised this practice and encouraged his wife and daughter to wear burqas. He described the earlier context of his family where sari with ghumto practice was common within his family. However, in the later phase of his education, he mentioned that he symbolized sari and ghumto practice with Hindu culture and introduced the practice of wearing *kurta-suruwal* along with burqa during the outdoor visit.

In this phase of his life, he was not in the mood to send daughters to modern schooling. He, therefore, decided to enroll his daughter in nearby Madarsa for basic religious classes at an early age. He mentioned that he believed that the girls were for the purpose of parda, and the modern schooling supporting co-education with the kind of dressing was not meant for the Muslim daughters. Similarly, he was also against public gesturing of Muslim females and strictly believed that it was religiously illegal and claimed it with the loss of prestige.

At first, he was interested in enrolling his son in religious schooling. However, he later changed his mind due to several reasons. One reason for this change was the increasing scope of employment due to modern education. He explained the context that pushed him to enroll his son in modern government schooling as,

My wife does not want our son to go far away from us. In fact, she was not happy with the structures of religious schools, which, in her perception, mainly consisted of children from poor families. She was worried about the feeding practice of religious institutes (Madharsas), which, according to her,

cannot match the food standard at home. Moreover, she also stresses the fact that there were no nearby mosques in our locality that carried religious schooling. Rather, the child needed to visit India for certificate-level religious schooling. In such a scenario, as a mother, she pressured me to change my plan of involving my son in such schooling. In the alternative, modern schooling was getting wider popularity among renowned families (Pahadi communities and other higher castes of Madhesi Hindus) in society. The job opportunities from the modern schooling were also attractive and receiving prestigious recognition. Therefore, due to pressure exerted by outside trend of modern government schooling and the wills of my wife forced me to alter the decision of sending son for religious schooling. But I decided to give religious *taleem* within home in addition to his outdoor modern schooling.

### **Life sketch at 45's**

He mentioned some of the memorable events of this phase of his life. He disclosed how some of his relatives and his own younger brother (working in Kathmandu) suggesting him for adopting family planning after he had three sons and three daughters. In this phase, he experienced different context than earlier ones when the children were considered as the gift of almighty Allah (god). He narrated the discussion of those periods as,

There was a kind of distinct environment around my context when the people around me had started planning for smaller families. There was the newer narrative of defining smaller families as happier families. My own brother used to mention that *pahadis* in city areas never go for bigger families, and they used to have happier families. My brother further used to describe how the marriage of a daughter has become a burdensome work due to intensified dowry at present, and the Muslims, at present, are not the same Muslims as before. In fact, my brother himself has gone for family planning with his three sons. However, I selected not to go against my religion with the hope that the almighty God would determine the future of my children.

In addition, he also recalled an interesting event of that phase of his life when he used to resist watching at home. He remembers how the children, in contrast, were fascinated by the growing trend of buying television and watching movies. In those phases, he recalls the conversation among his colleagues among religious scholars,

It was common faith among religious scholars that the television was for the purpose of spreading nudity and destroying the 'imaan' (faith) of Muslims. In fact, it was considered a distraction by *seitan* (evil powers), who were trying to mislead the path of the 'real Musalman.' This was taken as a tool to ruining the culture of Islam and dissolving the *parda* from our sisters/daughters. Initially, this is why we were all opposed to using television.

In this phase of his life, he encountered several life-turning movements where the growing influence of medicine, science, and technology was decreasing the scope of religious beliefs. He mentioned how the scope of health gets hijacked by hospital lines and doctors. The increasing impact of science and technology, according to him, has brought the faith of religion into question. During that time, he shared his own experience when the eyes of people were not as before for religious scholars. Therefore, he marked that the decision to give the continuity of modern schooling for his sons is a valid decision in the present scenario.

Moreover, he also mentioned that traveling became easier, which also assisted in learning several pieces of information about Nepali Muslims. Here, he showed how the regular basis visit to Jamaat has enhanced his fluency in the Nepali language. The easy visit to Kathmandu for religious and non-religious purposes because of the concentration of facilities was the reason that made him a fluent speaker of the Nepali language.

### **Life sketch at 50 and above**

He mentioned the impact of modern education on the family, which has resulted in the decline of Islamic beliefs in the familial context. He added that modern schooling constrains the room for the grooming of Islamic norms and values. In many cases, he shows how he has been changed due to the pressure exerted by the changing context in the family. One of the cases he highlights is the changing belief in marriage. He describes the changing context within his family due to modern education as,

The modern school's syllabuses differ from Islamic course content. Not only the course content but also the environment is not in the favor of Islamic codes. The practice of co-education is itself a contradiction to culture of Islamic principles of *parda*. In fact, the modern schools emphasizing on English and Nepali languages have been promoting Hindu *Pahadi* and Western culture. Therefore, the educated members within my own family have changed who are all against marriage within closer kinship. In the society with larger population of Hindus criticize Muslims for marriage within closer kinship (marriage within closer kinship avoiding the match from the common mother or the couples should not have fed milk by the same mother). Even our children studying in the modern schools come with criticism of such regime within Muslim religion. Therefore, the newer generations are against such marital practice. In addition, the transportation has also provided larger options for performing marital relations.

He argued how the changing contexts were against Islamic rituals; however, he cannot resist the changes for long. He mentioned that he was against irreligious practices of dowry after his religious schooling. However, in the later phase, during the marriage of his daughter, he shared that he had to be involved in the dowry exchange, which has become a common norm for marriage. He shared his experience at the age of 50 and above,

The Muslims of recent times are not the same Muslims as they were earlier, and the influence of religious codes is declining among Muslims. Almost all the Muslims have normalized the practice of dowry in the present context. In such a context, I needed to be a practical Muslim following time and context. Like many Muslim parents, I was also involved in a dowry exchange to find a better match for my daughter, which every parent desire to do for their children. In the context of finding a well-settled male candidate from a wealthy family, the offering of dowry is expected in the locality, and I am also involved in the practice.

In this regard, he explains the construction of the marital context of his daughter in the changing society is contributed by easy transportation facilities and growing of urbanization. He keeps his words as,

Due to the availability of higher job opportunities in city areas, my brother (a tailor master) started working in Kathmandu for several years. In this case, he got closer to one of his friends (also a tailor master) from Sarlahi district working in the same garment factory. This provided a space where they arranged a marriage at our home. This scenario was rarely feasible in earlier contexts. However, it became feasible due to easy transportation access and growing urbanization with work opportunities from different corners of the nation-state. The easy access to transportation, urbanization, and job opportunities in cities have facilitated gathering people from different geographical locations. This, in turn, has made distant marriage very common practice in recent contexts.

Similarly, he added that the distant marriage (away from closer kinship) has intensified the practice of dowry. He discusses the changing context as,

In fact, the earlier trend of marriage within closer kin gave enough space for negotiation due to the availability of close family members on either side of the marital family. This is used to avoid the strict implications of the dowry regime. However, a distant marriage lacks such privilege for negotiation between family members going for marriage as they hardly know each other like in a close kinship marriage case.

He further added why kinship marriage is becoming unpopular among Muslims and its linkage to dowry intensification,

The growing negativity among Muslims for marriage within kinship has resulted due to modern schooling and the increasing dominance of cultural practice of Madhesi Hindu, which stigmatize such marriage claiming it as a shameful act. In addition, transportation easy option also facilitated the distance marriage. Therefore, the distancing away from close kinship marriage and the increasing option of marital space after easy access of transportation have jointly contributed for the intensification of dowry practice among Muslims.

In the later phase of his life, he also agreed with the changes in himself where he mentioned that the daughters should be sent to modern schooling. However, he mentioned that they (daughters) should take proper care of their dressing with carrying of dupatta with their head covered. He presented in his views that the avoiding of daughters from modern education (like past) is, of course, not a good practice but they should be properly given religious information (Islamic *taleem*) regarding their gesture and boundary. Moreover, he also agreed that the expansive schooling, hospitals, dowries and other compulsory stuffs cannot support to stick in the earlier practice of larger family size—which also reflect the change in his early orientation against family planning.

Furthermore, he also shared that the relevance of the occupation of religious scholars is narrowed down with the narrowing scope of the field. He argued that the first choice of people regarding health issues has come as the treatment from the hospitals. In addition, very fewer people only visit the door of religious scholars for the purpose of health issues and the one visiting the religious scholars found to be relying in the either of the options of hospital and religious ways of treatment. Moreover, he added that the younger generation (both Muslims and Hindus) attaches the tag of ‘*dhongi*’ or cheater for religious scholars preferring *duwa-tabeez*. He also finds the role of media in changing the narration on *duwa-tabeez* and religious scholars. Therefore, he finds the profession of being a religious scholar is not in accordance with the changing context that can support easy family survival rather the profession is only limited to the servitude of God. Due to the changes, he argued that the Muslims need to learn modern skills and education for their survival purpose (*duniya*) however he need to prepare for the upper world (Allah and Din-Islam) as well for which he needed to remain in the line of Islam despite adaptation of modern education derived profession. This is the reason why he enrolled his children for modern schooling and context suitable skill learning.

In contrast to the decline in religious practice, in the later phase, he mentioned that he became used to using mobile phones and television, which contributed to making him well-informed about religious codes. He added that he used mobile and television to enhance his religious knowledge following several television programs. This program has made him more acute to the religious norms and values. He says,

There are several TV programs of the great religious scholars. I usually prefer the programs of Zakir Naik on Peace TV. This has helped me to be informed of several unexplored religious topics of interest. It has also contributed to revising some of my earlier misconceptions and making me a more acute religious scholar.

## **5. A Returnee from International Migration**

Rahmatullah Ansari (53), a changed name, is a returnee from international migration. He spent about a decade in a foreign land. He has two daughters and two sons.

### **Life sketch at 15**

He pictured his parents as illiterate (no modern or religious schooling) and described the context of

their parents with no access to any kind of schooling. Similarly, he also added that there was commonness among people of the locality in many ways, like dress-wearing kurta-pajama, speaking Bhojpuri, and illiteracy (as most of the people were uneducated). He further pointed out that education was an occupational tool for a few caste groups like Kayastha, Giri, and other Brahmins in his parents' early days.

Meanwhile, he mentioned a nearby mosque in the locality where the hired religious scholars used to provide basic schooling in Islam. There was a flow of Muslim children in the mosque, where he also spent his early days of childhood. The hired religious scholars were mainly from India. Therefore, there occurred the changing of religious scholars time and again also interrupted the process of religious schooling for the students enrolling in religious schooling. Furthermore, he mentioned that the issue of salary from the community (since the wages of religious scholars were collected from the community level) was one of the reasons why there was a noticeable fluctuation in the time and changes of religious scholars. In addition, he also added that the scattered population of Muslims resulted in the lower collection of monthly wages from the Muslim community. Similarly, he also added that the population of Muslims was middle class, and the comparative earnings from small villages were lower than those of bigger Muslim-holding areas of India.

In contrast, he mentioned an alternate fostering environment of modern schooling in the locality. He added that the attraction of modern schooling was dominant among every section of groups in society. This is the reason why every parent (including his parents as well) was engaging the children in modern schooling in addition to other kinds of schooling (evening shift he mentioned for mosque visit). In his early context of modern schooling, he also mentioned that the attraction for such schooling was mainly for sons (only the daughters of *Pahadi* community were mainly enrolling for modern schooling). He mentioned that the dominant cause for not sending daughters (his own sisters) to modern schools was the fear of inter-caste and inter-religion love marriage, which, in those contexts, was unacceptable for the sake of family prestige. Therefore, he shared that the parents in his locality preferred early marriage of daughters (Non-Pahadi Hindu and Muslims). In contrast, the educating daughters along with rejection of early marriage was common among pahadis. Similarly, he mentioned that there was a strong feeling of *parda* among Non-pahadi Hindus and Muslims in the locality, and he also admitted that he carried the same mindset about girls in those times.

In his early visit to the mosque near his home, he remembers how it taught the feeling of religious brotherhood with Muslims as a community. In his early days, he was keeping the frame of universal Muslimhood, and this particular sketch distinguishes him from other religious groups, 'Hindus.' He has a mother tongue of Bhojpuri and shared the same language with his early childhood friends (local friends near his home) until he reached modern schools.

During his school days, he recalls that there were many linguistic groups who sent their children to common government schools. He remembers having friends from different linguistic backgrounds, such as Hindi-speaking Marwadi and Nepali-speaking Pahadis. The teachers in the school also spoke mainly Nepali. In the beginning, he became familiar with the Nepali language, which he initially considered the Pahadi language. The school environment helped him to mix easily with different groups of people, attend festivals, and share sweets with other castes and religions. The user recalls one of his Pahadi friends who became a fluent speaker of Bhojpuri after staying in the school for a while, and then conversations were conducted in both Bhojpuri and Nepali. The course content, teachers, and school environment jointly contributed to making his Nepali speaking skills comparatively good.

In a similar way, he narrated his experiences of familial context when he was inclined to a religious way of living,

When I was young, my grandmother taught me that keeping a beard as soon as it starts growing on a male's face is pure. This practice is considered Sunnat in a religious context and is taught in mosques by religious scholars. My family's recommendation, especially my grandmother, influenced me, and I became devoutly religious. At the tender age of 15, I made the decision to dedicate my life to a religious way of living, and never shave my beard. I attended religious fasting (during Ramadan) from age 13 and even read Friday prayers most conveniently.

He dropped his studies when he was in class nine, and like many of his friends, he also went to Delhi to earn money. In his early stay in Delhi, he mentioned that his gesture was influenced by the cinemas of India. He became a regular consumer of *paan-masala* in an early phase of his adulthood. After his years of stay in India, he became a fluent speaker of Hindi. Moreover, he shared that he started having a clean shave and wearing a pant-shirt in accordance with the actors of Indian cinemas. He was married at the age of 21 when his wife was about 16 years old. He mentioned that his wife's educational background was basic religious schooling at her home.

### **Life Sketch at the 30s**

In his 30s, he showed how there has been growing interest among youth for abroad earning. In this context, he also selected to move abroad for better earnings. He mentioned that the number of children two daughters and two sons—was one of the reasons why he was selected to go to the Gulf country. He mentions,

The time has become different than that of my childhood. In the present context, teaching both sons and daughters has become compulsory. Modern education has become a basic requirement for children of the present generation. The cost of schooling and marriage of daughters is not easy. In fact, higher education for sons in modern schools and school-level basic education was compulsory for daughters. In addition to basic education, the daughter's marriage has become burdensome for every parent due to the intensification of dowry practice. The settled males with good earnings and good families (or rich families) demand bigger size of dowry. The status of Muslim males, due to modern education and education-led employment, has changed in society. Modern education has boosted its value in terms of prestige for Muslim males. Similarly, foreign employment has also changed the value of males due to their earnings from a foreign land. Due to the intensification of modern education, newer spheres of employment invited by the attainment of modern education, and foreign employment, the males who are comparatively more successful in these achievements are comparatively highly valued than other males even within the Muslim. The status of males has become a decisive factor in marital arrangements, surpassing caste notions within Muslims. However, the females in the Muslim locality are far behind in terms of engagement in modern education-led employment as well as foreign employment due to their comparative early marriage and prevailing religious values. There is competition for every parent of daughter to reach up to successful males for their daughter presenting a bigger offer of dowry for such males within Muslims. Therefore, my entire family supported my decision to move for foreign employment.

He further mentioned how the changing context after interaction in the Gulf countries affected different dimensions of his life. In the working company, he mentioned that Nepali workers with different socio-cultural backgrounds lived in unity with each other. He described those contexts as,

Previously, during my stay in the society, there was a distinction between the pahadis and other categories (other Hindus, Muslims) due to differences in language. The cultural differences and different family contexts made us far away despite sharing a common locality. However, the foreign land of the Gulf country marked us with a single labeling of 'Nepali', bringing all of us to the same place at the company's quarters. There were some of the friends of Pahadis roots from the hills of Nepal who were sharing the same living place in a foreign land. The easy sharing of the language of Nepali with common nationality brought me closer to many of the Pahadis friends.

He further describes the closer ties with one of the Pahadi friends in the Gulf country,

I became closer to one of my friends named Hari Rokaya (name changed) from the Western District of Nepal. We were working at the same company and staying in the company quarter. Our common nationality brought us together despite differences in the tone of Nepali. I always ask him to speak Nepali slowly during our conversation. Initially, he laughed at the way I spoke Nepali because it got a Bhojpuri tone. After a few months, he even became familiar with some of the Bhojpuri words he used commonly. We share almost every family matter with each other and support each other during our needs. In our families, we both have similar economic problems and the common pain of living away from the family that makes us closer. In similar ways, the sharing of stuff was also common due to our departure from the common international airport from Tribhuvan International Airport, Nepal; that is, the family of any of our colleagues used to send the necessary items through a friend who went on holiday in Nepal.

In the changing context in the Gulf country, he mentioned that the identity of ‘Nepali’ was enough criteria to connect two individuals in foreign lands. He, therefore, argued that the tag of either Gorkhali or Nepali was the common way of recognition, which he also used to be stuck with his ‘identity’ during his stay in the Gulf country. Moreover, he added that Dashain was a common festival for all Nepalese. There are hardly any people in one’s common district or zone of Nepal, which makes the nationality of being Nepali a dominant feature of recognition, shadowing other socio-cultural markers of identity (language, caste, religion, etc.). In his work tenure, he also recalled the interaction with workers from Bangladesh and Maldives,

From the religious line, Bangladeshi and Maldives workers were also Muslims, but I didn’t get closer to them. Their language and food culture were different from ours. I don’t like Bengali-cooked foods and their tastes were different from us. There was very little topic of conversation with them. In the same way, it is easier for Nepali workers from the Tarai region (similar cultural ties of North India with the Tarai region of Nepal) to communicate and maintain closer relationships with Indians, especially from U.P. and Bihar.

In the working phase in the Gulf country, he argued that he understood that religion is not universal worldwide. His early belief in Muslim brotherhood broke when he encountered Muslims from Gulf countries. He describes the context as,

The Muslims of the Gulf countries were richer, and they held the status of the owner of the company and treated every worker (despite their religion) in similar ways. They hold a higher degree of power and resist any individual (despite being Muslim) to keep marital (or any closer) relations in their nation. These richer Islamic states only privileged the rights of the citizens of that particular state. In those phases, I understood that the only identity that matters in the world is national identity. I also felt proud to be recognized as a Nepali Muslim rather than as a Muslim solely.

In a similar fashion, he also shared a different way of experiencing it as a Nepali Muslim and Gulf Muslim. He mentioned that general stereotyping of Muslims matches with Gulf Muslims and Nepali Muslims are not like them. The generalization of Muslims in terms of—four marriages, larger size of children, and burqa practice—is applied to the Muslims of Gulf countries and is irrelevant to Nepali Muslims. In his earlier perceptions about some of the Islamic beliefs, he mentioned that there emerged contradictions after his stay in the Gulf country. He compared the context of Nepal to contradict the belief of polygamy practice. He argued that the law of Nepal and the economic background of Muslims living there could not allow them to practice polygamy in Nepal as it is in practice in Arabic countries. Similarly, he also resisted the belief of having a larger family size after his comparison with the status of Gulf Muslims. He distinguished the contexts and stated,

The Muslims of the Gulf are richer, while the Muslims of Nepal (in our localities) struggle for their

daily living. In the same way, Muslims (like us) going for larger family sizes cannot afford the present cost of the market. Therefore, the common Muslims of Nepal cannot copy the Islamic codes adopted by Gulf countries. In fact, my own wife moves into fields for agricultural work on a regular basis. She also visits the market for the required stuff at home. In such cases, the use of the burqa practice cannot apply similarly to Arabic nations' practice.

### **Life sketch at 45**

Later on, after his return to Nepal, he mentioned the changing context that it used to be in his locality. The earlier society was split in the name of Madhesi-pahadi. He described how the established binary pushed him to the side of Madhesi, similar to many Muslims joining the Madhesi front. He added a description of those contexts as,

When returning from abroad, the scenario was different, with the higher influence of the Madhesh movement. In this context, he mentioned that there was an atmosphere of blaming the *pahadis* for the marginalization of *Madhesi* from state affairs. This added the feeling of the Madhesi-Pahadi divide to me as well. Being a Bhojpuri speaker, I also departed myself away from Nepali speakers who were *Pahadis* to me. I, too, joined the protest under the Madhesi banner. Before this, I was unaware of such an aggressive divide while spending most of my childhood in the Bara district. I have not worn the dress of the dhoti in my life, but the symbol of the dhoti (my father's dress) was a set of features that also attracted my emotions for identifying myself as a Madhesi.

In the movement, he showed that many Muslims engaged in the protest, and the identity of Madhesi became usual for all Muslims in the form of proud recognition. However, during the coronavirus pandemic, he mentioned that the group formed under the banner of 'Madhesi' got split since the Hindu groups started maintaining a clear distance from Muslims. He describes,

There started a forceful mechanism of otherizing us as a Muslim category. The cultural similarities and the closeness of Tarai-Madhesh (Nepal) with India affected our identity projection. The air of hatred against Muslims was swinging from the national media and the politics of the ruling party of India, which was jointly hampering the perceptions of local people against Muslims. Initially, we all were Madhesi for me. After such context set by India, the Hindus who were together as Madhesi started otherizing us as Muslims solely. This context also forced me to create a binary of Hindu-Muslim within Madhesi—where I am placing myself with a pure recognition of Muslims and the rest of Hindus as others.

With a smile on his face, in the interview, he acknowledges the swinging of his recognition over time with conflict of his personal identity in the zones of Nepali national versus Muslim; Madhesi versus Pahadi; and Hindu versus Muslim.

### **Life sketch above 50**

Later in his life, he mentioned that his perception of women changed. He adds,

The present scenario with the husband out of the country will not allow the wife to stick inside the home following the practice of *parda*. She needs to be responsible to look after the education of the children as well as the management of the home. The husband needs to visit a foreign land to earn cash while the wife needs to take care of house stuff. In such a scenario, the husband should be open enough; however, the wife also needs to be loyal to his husband.

In his words, his current explanation reflected the importance of culture and brotherhood. In the present context, he mentioned that the religious brotherhood is something that needs to be valued as it lasts up to death. This feeling came to him after the division was ongoing in the name of religion around his localities. He said that the hatred against Muslims on social media is something that draws the line between Muslims and Hindus. It forces us to identify ourselves in the religious line of Hindu and

Muslim.

## 6. A Businessman

Ramjan Miya (57), a changed name, had been running a Kathmandu business for about two decades. He handed over the shop to his sons five years ago and returned to his hometown in the Bara district. He has a close life experience of staying within his hometown in Bara district (signifies village for him) as well as in Kathmandu (signifies city for him). In this long run of life, he discusses changes in different dimensions of life at different phases.

### Life sketch at 15

Ramjan Miya (57), a changed name, is the son of Rahmat Miya Jolaha and Fatbanu Khatoon (a changed name). He is the child of the second wife of Rahmat Miya Jolaha, who married twice when the first wife failed to give birth to a son. Jolaha (57) mentioned that the practice of polygamy was common in the early days for several reasons, which included wives failing to give birth to sons, extramarital relations with other girls, cases that resulted in pregnancy, and so on. He mentioned that this practice was common among every caste and religious group in society. In his early days, he believed that multiple marriages for men were normal.

In his childhood, he went to a modern government school up to class seven and then discontinued his schooling. He mentioned that modern schooling was a new trend in society. However, it was not fascinating for every child in that phase. Mainly, a few sections of societies (like *pahadis*) were sending their children to schools while other caste groups, including Muslims, were sending them to modern schools due to their easy and free access to government schools. He described his own context where his parents were sending him to school for the reason that he could get engaged in school while his parents were busy with their outdoor work. Similarly, he also added that his parents resisted sending him to India for religious schooling (India was a nearby available place for religious schooling) due to poor service availability at religious institutes. After dropping out of school in class seven, his parent's network helped him to get a job at a clothing shop in the nearby market. The early enrollment in modern schools and workplace at the clothes shop of Marwadi brought him closer to other languages like Nepali and Hindi. Similarly, it also led to some other kinds of changes in other dimensions of his life. He describes those contexts as,

The working atmosphere in the market allowed me to have a new appearance of wearing pant-shirts. The dresses made me different from my friends in the village. The early dressings of our parents were changing, and the newer generations directed them away from those *gumcha-kurta-pajama* considering them as traditional and old fashioned.

He further mentioned that he was married to a girl who was a close relative. He added that his marriage was fixed during his early childhood (even though he was not sure about the exact age) from his parents. Following their parents' words, he was married when he was about 17 years old. At the time of his marriage, the age of his wife was about 14. In the description of his wife's education, he argued that hardly any girls were attending schooling in those contexts, so his wife has not also visited school.

### Life Sketch at the 30s

In the search for a bigger market, he mentioned that he reached several cities in India and finally settled in Nepal. He describes those experiences as,

To engage in agriculture was no longer as attractive as it was in the times of our parents. Agriculture was taken as a traditional occupation. The youths of our generation have newer options to get

enrolled in jobs centered in cities and markets. The comparatively easy access to transportation was inviting youths to explore bigger cities in India and Nepal.

In this process, he mentioned that he visited Bombay (Mumbai at present), India and worked in garment factories for about two years. Then, the health issue of his father pulled him back to his hometown in the Bara district. However, the lack of better work opportunities in his hometown again forced him to move to Kathmandu, Nepal (the capital city of Nepal and comparatively nearby to his hometown). After working for 2 years, he called his wife from the village. Previously, he was sharing a rented room with his friends; however, after welcoming his wife and three children, he hired a two-room flat. He had gone for family planning (which he considered a sin following religious norms), mentioning the logic that,

Raising a larger family in urban areas can be very expensive. Even with a rented two-bedroom flat, providing adequate accommodation for the family can be challenging, unlike in rural areas. Furthermore, in cities, it is rare to have nearby relatives to help care for children, as is common in rural areas. In cities, everything must be paid for, whereas in rural areas, many things are free. Consequently, family planning, where couples have two or three children, is more prevalent in urban areas. In cities, people hardly know each other, unlike in rural areas, where there is a strong sense of community and people watch out for one another. This made me positive about family planning, which I resisted in the earlier phase, considering it against religion. Moreover, the national media were also vocal in the promotion of narratives like 'sano pariwar, Khushi pariwar,' that is, a small family is a happy family. The national media were also advertising the use of contraceptive devices for family planning. In fact, there was a perception in the cities that villagers were 'illiterate' and went for bigger size families. Therefore, the different contexts provided by cities forced me to change my earlier perception and go for family planning.

During his stay in Kathmandu Valley, he mentioned that the commonly used language of communication was Nepali, while staying in his hometown, there were exchanges in the Bhojpuri language. He added that he used to speak in Bhojpuri during his stay with his family, while during his shop hours (outdoors), there was a common language exchange in Nepali. The differences in language tone made me different from other Nepali-speaking communities. In this context, he recalls feeling a sense of closeness with Bhojpuri or Maithali-speaking visitors. In a similar fashion, he also added that anyone visiting the shop from the Bara district smells like relatives with whom there was spontaneous talk for hours. He argued that such differences in terms of language or feeling of regionality were silent when he was staying in his hometown for years. Therefore, he pointed out that staying in Kathmandu Valley generated the feeling of *Pahadi* for Nepali speakers while it separated others in the common category of 'Madhesi.'

### **Life sketch at 45**

In the years of travel to several urban cities of Nepal and India, he mentioned that the context of cities helped him to dismantle some of the earlier stands set by villages and religions. He was convinced by the idea that there should be equal schooling rights for both son and daughter, which challenged his earlier perceptions on subject matters like co-education against Islam, compulsory *parda* for girls, and a non-Islamic atmosphere in cities for daughters. He describes how the changing context of cities helped him to change his earlier narrative toward girls' education,

In recent times, there has been a growing trend of educating children at the national level. In the context of cities, it was common for parents to enroll their daughters in schools. However, in rural areas, it was still common for daughters to be engaged in household work with their mothers rather than attending school. As a result of the changing social context due to my stay in the city, I was able to easily enroll my daughter in a modern school.

He also mentioned that there was easy movement for his wife in the cities. In his busy work schedule, he added that his wife was carrying children to school. In addition to managing household work, she was taking care of the schooling stuff of the children. He also added that it was common for females to visit outdoors in the cities, and there was less concern among people. The earlier notion of relating females as a prestige of home following the maintenance of *parda* is not applicable in the cities with changing the roles of females as he referred to the case of his wife. In the long stay in the context of the city, there has been a change in his perception of *parda*.

### **Life sketch at 50 and above**

While referencing the marital age of his daughter, he mentioned that he is no longer occupied with the previous notion of marrying his daughter as early as she crosses puberty (usually after her menstrual start). In contrast, the education of the daughter, as he shared, provided him with a valid reason for the delay in the age of marriage. He further described the detailed logic of why he became more vocal about female education rather than supporting the previous practice of early marriage following the practice of *parda*. He mentioned the contrasting context as,

In the previous context, the inquiry about marriage included the girl's behavior, family background, and her engagement in indoor work. This involved the early marriage of girls with the practice of *parda* after they reached puberty (generally 14 and 15 years). I also followed the same way of perceiving the women. However, at present, the context is different. The inquiry of marriage primarily includes girls' modern education and the dowry due to the intensification of dowry practice and the popularity of modern schooling. Many of our daughters get badly treatment at their husband's homes due to the issue of dowry. In this context, I am in the line and also suggest other Muslim parents invest in modern schooling and make them self-capable so that they will not be part of the exploitative practice of dowry. I am not in my earlier line of placing our girls indoors; rather, I want them to stand on their feet. Similarly, I, too, support the equality for women like men and their involvement in coeducation.

Similarly, he added that the context has changed a lot after the Government's introduction of an easy policy for education and employment for females.

Initially, at the age of 15, I was against the modern schooling of our sisters in an open environment. I, too, considered it against the religious practice to engage our girls in co-education. Like many Muslims, I also followed the restriction not to expose our girls in public gestures. I, too, considered it against our religion and family prestige. However, at present, the growing popularity of modern education and the easy entrance of girls to fascinating government job opportunities through the scheme of reservations in the name of Women, Madhesi, and Muslims forced me to shift the earlier positioning and attracted me, and many other Muslims like me to send our daughter to modern schooling and preparation of government employment.

Furthermore, he also mentioned that the marriage of his bachelor's degree completed daughter was arranged with the son-in-law Muslims. In the arrangement of the marriage of his daughter, he added that the prime criteria were that the son-in-law should be Muslim (regardless of caste within Muslims), educated, good behavior, and should have government employment. In contrast, he recalled the early ages of his life when his father was looking to match his sister with criteria like Muslim Ansari, a rich and prestigious family in society. Therefore, he reflected on changes in the perception of marital criteria in his generation, which he finds growing in either city and slowly in villages as well. In his recent stay in his hometown, he added that most of the families are equally sending their son and daughter to schools in newer generation Muslims.

He also mentioned how his stay in urban cities made him a different Muslim from the rural (village)

Muslim. He shared that his stay in the city allowed him to draw the line between rural Muslims and urban Muslims. Here, he marked rural Muslims as ‘backward,’ ‘conservative,’ and ‘traditional’ while he identified the urban Muslims as progressive and open-minded. He placed himself in the category of urban Muslim with the introduction of several changes in his earlier way of perceiving females.

While recalling the context of movement between *Madhesi-Pahadi*, he added that there erupted a sharp spark for the sentiments of Madhesi. He remembered how the regional movement was catching the sentiments against Pahadi, with whom he mentioned was staying for a long time. During his long stay in Kathmandu, he further asserted that he had a good relationship with some of the families from Pahadi communities, and they had developed feelings of family ties. However, he argued that the phase of movement had left him with a hatred feeling for Pahadi when he shared that he started visualizing Pahadis as exploiters and others from Madhesi.

In the later phase of his life, he decided to stay in his hometown after strike of corona pandemic. He mentioned that he was excited to live in his birthplace with the people of closer ties. However, he experienced the divide in the name of religion among people. He reflected that the current context has created an atmosphere where there is struggle for identity during several occasions like during election. He finds that the existing context of national politics have given air to go for identity politics which becomes dominant during different stages of election. He argued that there has drawn a sharp line in the name of religion within Madhesi, which was once homogenous category during his stay at Kathmandu valley. In the present context, he classifies ‘Hindus’ as other category than Muslims and the present classification has resulted in the rise of his religious sentiments forcing him to the weekly visit of mosques for Friday prayer.

## **7. A Property Dealer**

Shahid Miya (63) is a dealer of property residing in the Bara district. He has four daughters and two sons.

### **Life sketch at 15**

Shahid Miya (63) describes that he has not received a formal educational degree. However, he mentioned that he had visited schools in the early years of his childhood due to the trend of modern schooling in society. He rejected the impact of such context on females, stating that there was no imagination of females enrolling in schools, which also applied to his own sisters (who did not attend school).

While figuring out the logic for the termination of education, he mentioned that the profit within the parental business attracted him towards the business at an early age when he started assisting hands in the business as an elder son. He explains the business background of his father as,

Initially, my father was involved in agriculture as well as other work in the market. In the later phase, he (my father) was completely involved in business due to good earning from the business. My father was doing exchange of food grains and supply of woods by travelling at different places. This profession was profitable for entire family and therefore like our parents and we sons, were also involved in the same profession. In the early years of travelling, I was interacting with diverse people in different localities. Therefore, I was familiar with the languages of Tharu (similar to Bhojpuri but with a different tone) and Nepali (pahadis living near forest areas) during my working phase.

However, he mentioned that he had not copied the similar dress-up gesture of his parents, who were wearing dhoti-kurta-gamcha, since he argued that the new youths were attracted to pant-shirt. During

that phase of the conversation, he disclosed that he got married at the age of 18, while his wife was just 15. He went on to describe his wife's background, mentioning that she is from the nearby border of Raxual, India. Furthermore, he adds that his wife has also not attended modern schooling; however, she has a good command over religious education due to her family's religious background. Therefore, he mentioned that his wife strongly believes in Islamic rituals like Roja and Namaaz. Additionally, he mentioned that living in areas with a high number of Hindi speakers helped him become fluent in the language, and he developed a taste for Paan.

Furthermore, he also added that he had expanded his business to different *Pahadi areas* than his parents. The easy availability of transportation facilities with road construction helped him to reach up to different localities. In the phase of his traveling to the Pahadi belts, he mentioned that he had come closer to many of his friends from those localities and finally got used to the habit of drinking alcohol.

### **Life Sketch in 30s**

He reminisced about his life during his thirties and forties. He revealed that during that time, he spent most of his time outdoors, conducting business which helped him accumulate a lot of property. He mentioned that he was quite well-known in the area and almost every wealthy person was aware of his name. He spoke of his popularity in the locality, where he highlighted how he was one of the few who owned and drove a motorcycle. Moreover, he added that he used to wear clean clothes only after washing and ironing them from a nearby dhobi, who was a member of the Muslim caste. He also mentioned that individuals from various economic backgrounds used to visit him for cash at a relatively lower interest rate. He admitted that he was less concerned about religious matters in his day-to-day schedule. He further mentioned that such practices of borrowing money with interest were common in the market, which influenced him to engage in the practice.

In the conversation, he also mentioned that he had four of his daughters who were older than his sons. Therefore, he was also aware of managing cash as a dowry for the marriage of his daughter in the future. In his statement, he further revealed that the good (synonyms wealthy) families, even in the Muslims, demand a bigger amount of dowry. During the conversation, he brought up the topic of dowry exchange in Muslim culture. He explained that this practice signifies matching social status between families when entering into a relationship. He added,

The practice of dowry has become a way of reflecting class identity within the Muslim community. The exchange of dowry classifies Muslims into two categories - 'rich Muslims' and 'poor Muslims'. Wealthy Muslims tend to celebrate this practice, and during the process of arranging a marriage, it is mandatory to match families based on their class. Therefore, I also intend to select a wealthy Muslim family for my daughter's marriage. I even want to acquire a collection of property for the purpose of the dowry.

During his children's schooling phase, he decided to enroll his daughter in a nearby government school. However, he was also worried that his elder daughter might elope as educating daughters was not well-received in society. He adds:

Previously, there were fears of biting back for adult daughters if they were unmarried. The daughters were symbolized as the 'prestige of the family' and the 'responsibility of the father.' These notions forced me to discontinue the education of my elder daughter after she passed class eight. In fact, there were assumptions that girls were for cooking and taking care of families where *sadharan lekh-padh* (basic schooling) was enough for daughters. The outdoor public gesturing in the market without parents or guardians of girls after adulthood was considered taboo. While arranging the marriage of my elder daughter, I have also considered every societal consideration; therefore, she was married at the age of 17 years.

He further mentioned that the criteria for his daughter's marriage included following the son-in-law's family's caste (jolaha), social class (wealthy), and religion. In this context, he was against marrying his daughter to a son-in-law enrolled in foreign employment. The major argument behind the statement was that the daughter married to stay with her husband cannot get proper time to spend time with him.

### **Life sketch at 45s**

He mentioned a change in the context where there was an increase in the priorities of education, and educating daughters was gaining popularity in society. This pushed him to admit his youngest daughter to college-level education before arranging her marriage. He explains the changes in the context where many parents were sending their daughters for modern education. The scenario of outdooing females with the tag of education had become a prestigious move in society. According to him, such changing narrations also pulled him to invest in higher-level education for his daughter. He further added that the education of girls was also developing as one of the popular criteria for organizing arranged marriages. In his words, such educational context changed his earlier beliefs against co-education during the adult phase for girls.

He added that the earlier narrative planted in the name of religion for the age of marriage of girls also broke down after the introduction of modern educational practice. During the time of the marriage of his youngest daughter, he mentioned that she was age 21, which was acceptable in society. Similarly, he also revealed that the increasing trend in education among females changed his narrative, which was against solo outdoor marketing for females. He described it as,

Previously, I used to overlook my wife for marketing purposes. I believed that women could only be good at kitchen work. I assumed that women were blunt and could easily be cheated. It was my common understanding that women should be involved in indoor work. However, I realized my assumption to visualize women as blunt was wrong when my educated daughter started helping with household shopping. My wife and daughter are very knowledgeable about the quality of household products and are able to negotiate reasonable prices in the market. They even travel to nearby markets across the border in Raxaul, India, to purchase products at cheaper rates.

He then makes the argument that it was his fault to consider females as household material. Rather, he felt that the importance of education in daughters changed his perception towards females. He reflected his daughter as talented and had good performance in her education.

### **Life sketch at 50 and above**

He narrates his experiences in the phase of his life in the 50s and 60s. In his mid-fifties, he mentioned that he became sick with a lung infection, and after that, the doctor restricted him from avoiding his alcohol habit. From the pressure of the family members, he mentioned that he slowly terminated his habit of drinking and became less active in public life. He describes the changes as,

After experiencing poor health, I began to spend more time with my family at home. My wife, who is devoted to religious rituals such as roza and namaz, started encouraging me to adopt a more religious way of life. As I grew older and more dependent on my family, and also became increasingly fearful of death, I found myself drawn to religion even more. As a result, I began attending Friday prayers at the mosque (Jumma namaaz). During this phase of my life, I was heavily influenced by the mosque and the religious scholars associated with it. Being in close proximity to these individuals who were actively involved in Islamic practices, I was inspired to make some significant changes to various aspects of my life. I adopted the practice of wearing a

kurta-lungi and growing a small beard, which aligns with religious tradition and is currently popular.

He also added that he utilized his earlier networks to help in the collection of the funding for the supplementary investment in the religious path. After that, I slowly reduced and then terminated the practice of levying interest in investment (beyaaz) practice. He mentioned the logic behind the termination as,

There are two distinct reasons why I slowly reduced and then terminated the practice of levying interest in investment (beyaaz). The first logic behind the termination was my enrollment in property dealing, which was rising as one of the most profitable businesses after the Maoist and Madhesh revolution. Here, a section of the population (mainly pahadi) in the locality was migrating by selling their properties at relatively lower prices. Similarly, there was also migration from villages to the district headquarters for the purpose of better education and transportation. Therefore, the initial properties used for agricultural purposes were slowly transferred into residential purposes, and such transformations opened a new space for business opportunities, which also fascinated me in the line. In the same way, the second logic that pushed me away from such practice (beyaaz) was my recent attachment with religious gesture, which pressured me to stop such religiously illegal practice.

Finally, he added how religion came into being as one of the deciding factors while searching for a daughter-in-law. He narrates those contexts as,

We (couples) are heading towards our old age, and our health status is also not good. So, we are searching for a religiously aware daughter-in-law who can properly care for the entire family. In addition to the modern education, we also prefer her religious education. We have enough property for our son and don't want our daughter-in-law to work outdoors. Rather, she should give good management of the family. Therefore, we want our daughter-in-law to be from a religious and well-cultured family who have also proven their daughter's religious schooling along with modern schooling.

## **8. A Rajmistri (mason)**

Rahim Alam (59), a changed name, calls himself as a rajmistri (mason) who works for building houses of stone and bricks. He has three sons and one daughter.

### **Life sketch at 15**

He recalls the early life of his childhood at his birthplace in Bara district. He categorized his early hometown with the bold marking of identity where caste, religion, and family background were dominant characters for identity recognition. He mentioned that there were different identity backgrounds of people in his locality, and these people were quite aware of other's family backgrounds as well due to the follow-up of several generations in the village. He reflected on those times when the language of Bhojpuri was the dominant means of communication in the village, and the language was sufficient for his entire life, mainly during his parent's time. He remembered how his parents, in their entire life, were not required to learn a language other than Bhojpuri. In a similar way, the dhoti-kurta-gumcha was the only dress for his father while his mother used to wear dhoti-samij (luga-big blouse).

The religious marking was sharp during festivals during his stay in the village as the Hindu friends were demanding invitations to Eid and Bakri Eid while he (other Muslim friends) was also demanding prasad (sweets) from their (Hindu) festival. The well-known identity among each other in the birthplace has also drawn some of the lines where there was a restriction in the name of religion. He recalled a

context of differentiated housing in the name of religion where there was a religious room at his close friend's (Hindu) home, which was a place of restriction for others (Hindu, other castes, and Muslim). Similarly, there was also room at his (as a Muslim) home which was used for the prayer purpose and this was maintained pure (*paak-saak*) for carrying religious prayer of five times of his mother.

He mentioned that caste played a significant role within Muslim communities, particularly during marriage. His own marriage and those of his siblings followed strict caste requirements, reflecting the importance of upholding religious and caste traditions. Early marriage, between the ages of 14 and 19, was also common, while delaying marriage was viewed negatively. He himself married at the age of 18, while his wife was 17, following the traditional trend of early marriage.

When talking about his education, he mentioned that he had only received a basic level of modern schooling from a nearby government school. During that time, education was not as valued as it is today, and boys were often expected to start working as soon as they reached their teenage years. Similarly, girls were not given the opportunity to receive an education as they were expected to focus on household chores and duties instead. In our family, there was little interest in religious schooling as no one was willing to send their children away from home for religious education (as formal religious schooling was unavailable at nearby localities). Moreover, he mentioned that the only required criteria inquired in the community were basic religious training, such as Roza and Namaz. He believed that this training did not necessarily require religious schooling abroad. That is why he argued that he selected to learn the skills of earning, which can finally match the expectations of ongoing trends and also assist in breaking the poverty of the family. At this stage, he mentioned that he interacted with one of the neighbors who helped him learn masonry. There was a growing demand for masons at the time, as people started investing in brick and stone houses over mud houses (*maati k ghar*).

### **Life Sketch in 30s**

In the later phase of the 30s, he mentioned that there was a growing trend of going to cities. He added that there was much construction work in the cities, opening larger work opportunities for *rajmistri* (mason). In this process, he showed that many of his friends in a similar field visited several cities in Nepal and India. He described the context as,

In our group, there are several workers in the same field, and we used to assist each other as a team to make money. This includes workers of the same district – although from different localities. We, worked in a team and were aligned in terms of professional background. However, we belonged to different castes and religions. The differences in terms of caste and religion became irrelevant when we started to live out from the birthplace. We all share the same flat, kitchen and different regularly used materials.

He mentioned how staying in a foreign land (away from his homeland) has changed his rigid perceptions regarding religious beliefs which were once dominant in the homeland. He narrates the differences while staying away from his homeland,

During the stay in the homeland, the food practice relied on the religious and local codes. There was no debate in between food categorization of halaal and non-halaal as this, by default, counted as a halaal food practice for Muslims at home. However, working in the cities invited a different scene while eating in the hotel and sharing rooms (flats and kitchen) with friends. In such context, there arose the issue of halaal versus non-halaal. In the teammates sharing the kitchen, most of the members were Hindu and they (Hindu friends) were adapted to eating both halaal and non-halaal. The stay away from homeland also introduced newer habit of consuming food in any hotel or restaurant accessible. The line of distinction between halaal and non-halaal also became complex and inseparable. During the initial phase of my stay in the city, I maintained the lines drawn for

halaal and non-halaal. However, it became challenging in the long run. In the long run stay in the city, the maintenance of the line became vague, and in many cases, I hardly became concerned with the earlier practice, and I too joined the other friends with the common habit of sharing every kind of food (halaal and non-halaal). Moreover, we (despite religion) also developed the habit of performing celebrations after earning in working sites as a standard party culture, common in cities. The way of celebration added the consumption of alcoholic products like beer with friends, which most of us avoid while staying at home. I, too, considered alcoholic products as haram (religiously impure) and maintained distance at my stay in homeland. In fact, the context of the city was different as there was no pressure from family or relatives or anyone (away from their homeland) to talk about such habits in cities that used to be expected in the village. In contrast, the culture of parties and consumption of alcoholic products in cities was common.

He mentioned his newly adopted habit of eating non-halaal meat and alcoholic items after his stay in the cities. He argued that he used to avoid such practices in the name of religion and societal prestige during his stay in his homeland. Similarly, he also recalled how staying away from his homeland created a challenge to follow the religious way of life. He further mentioned that the culture of city departed from the line of religion and caste. In contrast, he argued that the culture of every individual in cities shared common life style and homogeneous culture which was influenced by standard culture of city that devalue caste and religious orientations. In this case, he illustrated with an example of Ramjaan (a Muslim festival), which according to him, becomes challenging after staying away from the homeland in the urban cities. He describes those contexts as,

The stays in cities are more challenging than in the homeland. During the time of Ramjaan, there is fasting for a month. Previously, at the village, there was the charm of the festival among every family member with the allocation of works in the family members. My wife (or my mother) used to cook early in the morning before the allocated time of eating in accordance with the religious calendar. Such practices at home were convenient for male members who went to outdoor work at the time. In fact, there was a religious and societal perception that males were allocated for outdoors while females were assigned for indoors. The males performing indoor work in the village were considered the third gender as gay (*mauga*), and it was against societal prestige. However, during our stay in the city, we were forced to be involved in kitchen work and washing clothes (indoor work). These ways of males performing in-door work were common in cities. Therefore, it became challenging to smoothly manage the religious calendar of Ramjaan by operating both indoor and outdoor work. It lacks the charm of a festival with sharing the room with friends following different religions. We, all friends, had similar appearances and routines that were not in accordance with religion.

He further described the reason for distancing away from religious practices,

On other days than Ramadan, kitchen work was shared among teammates sharing a flat. However, during Ramadan, I had to cook at different times on the same day as the roommates were from different religions. This used to add an extra load to my work schedule. During the initial phase of my stay in urban areas, I adopted the religious practice of fasting. But in my extended stay in the city, I felt it burdensome to practice a religious way of life. The atmosphere of the city does not care about the religious follow-up of an individual, like the atmosphere around the village, which closely monitors the steps of the individual. This allowed me to go with the routine of friends, and I left fasting during my later stay in the city.

He also added that his stay in cities changed his perceptions towards modern education, and he was highly fascinated by the English-speaking schooling atmosphere where schooling children (both sons and daughters) wear ties, belts, and bags along with other school uniforms. In the conversation, he repeatedly picked the term English Private Boarding School over Government schools to show how he had admitted his children to such Boarding schools for a brighter future for his children. Similarly, he

also mentioned that the non-discriminating atmosphere in the cities changed his mind set to enroll his son or daughter in modern schooling.

### **Life sketch in 45s**

In the working tenure of several urban areas with easy access to transportation, he mentioned that there is a platform for interaction of people from several places. These contexts helped him with learning several languages like Maithali, Hindi, Nepali, and Awadhi.

According to him, the working spheres of his wife were also not like the previous ones after he started working away from the homeland. In the flow of time, he added that she slowly started visiting outdoors for the daily requirements of the house and children. The urban context where men and women equally share the load of family also made him open to accepting the women's outdoor visit as normal. Moreover, there was also a compulsion to use a mobile for his wife, which he considered a present requirement for women (with a foreign land-working husband). In those contexts, he also admitted that the use of mobile has broken the earlier practice of *parda* as it has facilitated the bigger networking of people with the option of maintaining privacy from societal eyes. Therefore, he argued that the religious practice of *parda* has just existed in words, and in practice, this has vanished after the trend of foreign employment and the use of mobile. He explained how the urban context has reshuffled his earlier perception of women,

Previously, in my 15s, women were considered to perform household indoor work, which was popularly recognized as *ghar-grihastha*. I also used to relate women with *parda* fitting into the exact role of handling family and indoor work. However, my experience in the town changed my way of thinking as women equally share outdoor work in the city. Therefore, I, too, allowed my wife to handle the home on her own in the time phase of my engagement in works away from home. Similarly, I, too, permitted my wife to use mobile phones. The mobile phones were initially considered against the belief of *parda*. In a way, my perception of *parda* has changed. Previously, I used to relate *parda* with the restriction of women from the public or other strangers' gesture. However, in the present context where foreign employment and mobile phones became like compulsory, the *parda* for me is the loyalty of the women. It means the women or girls should not be restricted into four walls rather they should also share the workload of outdoor. However, they need to maintain the prestige of the family by not doing any work that hurts their husband's trust.

He argued that there were differences among people in his homeland. However, it was not an issue for him. He mentioned that the language of Bhojpuri, which he also mentioned as his mother tongue, is dominant among the people in his homeland. Similarly, he also relates that the tastes of the market in the homeland are also in accordance with their kitchen or culture. Such dominant characteristics will not allow him to care about differences. However, the scene becomes different in a foreign land. He describes it as,

This created a feeling of us versus them once I reached away from my homeland. Differences in language, taste, and overall culture force us to draw the line between us and them. This pushed us towards comparing several differences that distinguish us from them.

He linked this experience to his stay at different places, which helped him to make different narratives for them (other people than them). There is a marker of language where the interaction in Hindi among Indians makes a line of distinction. With a smile on his face, he categorized the people of India as Hindi speakers, dishonest and unfaithful, who generally engage in chattering for payment after work. His interaction during work tenure at different cities of India led to such a conclusion.

In contrast, he labeled most of the pahadi's of hill cities of Nepal as loyal and acknowledged their hard

work. He recalls the characteristics of pahadis that he encountered during his work tenure as,

The people from the Hill region of Nepal, known as Pahadis, are generally loyal and less likely to bargain. This makes contract working with them more profitable. However, their food recipes, such as how they cook saag and use oil and salt, are different from ours and may require us to search for Madhesi restaurants to match our taste. Additionally, our language differences can easily distinguish us from Pahadis, creating further differences while working in Hill cities of Nepal. Unfortunately, there is a negative perception of North Indians, particularly those from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, or those who speak Bhojpuri, among Pahadis group. Similarly, Madhesis of Tarai Nepal, who speaks like North Indians or Bhojpuri speakers, also have to face inferior and ill-treatment due to their language differences. Negative labels such as "Bhaiya" or "Dhoti" clearly distinguish Madhesis and Pahadis. I have personally experienced such differences during my time working in the cities of Hill, Nepal.

### **Life sketch at 50 and above**

He discussed his changing of interest due to the age factor. He argued that the foreign land is inappropriate for every age group. Rather, the inclination towards the 50s is an indication of a shift to the homeland. At this phase, the age will not allow to engage in multiple works at the earlier speed. Similarly, there is also a social factor that demands the presence of parents (father as well) when children become adolescents. It becomes difficult for mothers solely to handle the children with the growing age of children. Moreover, he also addressed how the homeland has experienced several changes over the last two decades that invite the working spheres for masons. He mentions,

The birthplace has also changed a lot over the years, inviting work opportunities for our profession. There has been an increase in construction work, opening bigger spheres of work opportunities for masons in the homeland as well. The homeland has been changed from a municipality to a metropolitan city. Large national projects like the fast track connecting Tarai to Kathmandu (the capital city) have affected many localities of the Bara district, transforming the earlier profession of agriculture to an attractive center for residential settlement from nearby villages. This has increased the construction work in the district headquarters and nearby areas. Similarly, the trend of foreign employment and earning from it have also brought expansion in the changing of housing from mud to concrete houses. Such changing contexts in the homeland also made it easy to make the decision to stay at one birthplace with increment in age. There is no doubt that the earnings in the homeland are comparatively lower than those in highly urbanized cities; however, the bigger cities are more appropriate for highly energetic youths between the age group 20 and 40 than those in their 50s. Therefore, in the later phase of life, with the increment of age, I decided to stay in my homeland.

He added how his stay in his homeland revised his earlier practice built during the time spent in urban cities. He said he started fasting, which is compulsory during his stay in his homeland. Similarly, he showed how the mosque is the common place for gathering a number of friends of similar age groups, which also attracted him to attend Friday prayer (Jumma-Prayers) on a continuous basis. With age increment, he argued that the other Hindu friends became closer to *puja-path* (worship in Hindu) while the Muslim ones also went to their mosques, making a newer circle of friends in the same community.

Moreover, he also mentioned that the stay at home again brought back the habit of eating *halaal* items. The adaptation of such practices has also put the notion of Hindu-Muslim in the mindset, which was, blurred during the stay in the cities. As he presented, the logic was the monitoring of relatives, neighbors, and established identity of Muslims in the society.

Recalling the context of his age of 45 and 50, he reflected on the changing local context that brought him under the blanket of different recognition and identity over the years. He pointed the fire in the

context that pushed the division of localities into binary categories of Madhesi and Pahadi. In the bold and clear split between Madhesi and Pahadi during the Madhesh movement, he fitted himself into the line of Madhesi due to his cultural affinity (language, dressing, and food culture) that makes him stand away from *Pahadis*. However, he also recalled how the established identity of Madhesi gets further divided and describes the context,

In the localities, there has been a growing issue of Hindus and Muslims. Things have changed a lot in the local context after the emergence of Modi in India. The feelings of Hindu Muslims have been injected among local youths and the overall age category of people. There has been the active mobilization of RSS institutions and other branches favoring Hindutva politics in the Tarai belts of Nepal, which also shares an open border with India. Similarly, the easy availability and long craze of Indian mainstream media (which operates in the BJP with a Hindutva agenda) within Nepal Tarai has also set a tune for the religious split among people who have closer socio-historical ties.

He witnessed the divide's context that came to the surface during the pandemic. In his experience, the relationship between Hindus and Muslims has changed in the present context, and the distance between Bhojpuri-speaking Hindus and Bhojpuri-speaking Muslims has increased in the local context.

## 9 A Butcher

Jalaluddin Miya (64) has been a butcher since his childhood. He is also involved in goat trading. He visits different corners of the district to buy goats. He has three sons and three daughters. He arranged the marriage of each of his children and equally distributed the property among his sons. At present, he lives with his younger son.

### Life sketch at 15s

He recalled his early childhood experience of sharing the practice of rearing goats in his family. His mother used to feed the goats while his father was a butcher (goat meat seller). From childhood, he has heard that Muslims eat beef however, this was not in practice for Muslims in his locality or any other nearby localities. He mentioned that it was never a scenario for hearing beef consumption or supply in the localities (or nearby localities). He added that there was a common consciousness among butchers that the beef trade is forbidden in Nepal. Therefore, the categorization for butchers involves chicken meat sellers, goat meat sellers, and buff meat sellers. By default, in our locality, the meat means chicken, mutton, or buff.

He shared his childhood experience when the butcher profession was mainly operated by Muslims, a particular caste group called *chikada* or *chikuwa*. It used to be the time when the term *chikada* or *chikuwa* was the defining identity that carried negative connotations within Hindus as well as Muslims (other castes). The logic behind it, as he mentioned, was that the profession was considered an inhuman act.

He mentioned that their profession was limited to their locality and thus, the local people were only the customers. In addition, he describes the outlook of his parents where his father, who wore a dhoti-kurta-gumcha, had a long beard, while his mother wore a sari-blouse like other men and women in the locality. In a similar way, their parents spoke only Bhojpuri. The only difference that made his father different from others is his way of keeping a long beard. At those phases, he remembered that the beard with no mustache was considered a sunnat for Muslims, and he also followed the same schooling of beard keeping. In fact, he stated that the name and outlook of the butcher were prime for carrying the profession messaging people about *halaal* meat.

He argued that a good earning in the profession contributed to the proper functioning of the family.

This was the reason why he assisted his father, and, at a very early age, he was also involved in the profession. While talking about his formal educational enrollment, he denied any kind of schooling background. Similarly, he described his marital journey where he mentioned that he was married at the age of seventeen when the age of his wife was fourteen years old. While talking about the educational background of his wife, he opposes the concept of enrolling any girls, including his wife, in formal schooling at that time. The common work of his wife, as he described, was similar to his mother, who mainly helped with indoor work. However, he argued that in the initial phase, his wife maintained *parda* with *ghumto* from outdoor people and people of home with relationships like sasur (father-in-law) and bhasur (husband's elder brothers).

### **Life sketch at 30**

He mentioned that, with improving transportation facilities, the market expanded over the years. In time, he shifted the meat shop to a defined market area where people from different localities were visiting. During this phase, he made good relations with people of different socio-cultural backgrounds. Similarly, he also started buying goats from different localities for the sake of higher profit. The relationship formed after shifting the shop to the market assisted him in traveling and getting closer to different people. He mentioned that there were two areas: the bazaar (market) and dehaat (backward village). He managed a shop in the market, but occasionally visited dehaat to purchase cheaper goats. Due to the interaction of *bazaar* and *dehaat*, he said that he was introduced to different languages that helped him learn Tharu and Pahadiya (Nepali) language.

During his early 40's, there was a growing craze of cinemas for youths, which he mentioned was altering the taste of youths. It was introducing changes among youths who were changing their dressing to differently sewed pant-shirt copied from movies, and the earlier pattern of dressing with dhoti-gumcha was viewed with the negative societal mindset of *dehati* traditional. This changing context also pushed him to change his outfit with pant-shirts with readymade innerwear that were directly available in the market in different sizes. In his narration, he admitted that he also joined the changing dressing pattern. However, he stated that he has been using a lungi with Ganji (innerwear) mainly during his stay at home or at night time.

At that time, he recalled that he was not very aware of family planning, and this practice was not common among the people of society. "It was a common pattern of going for the larger number of children and in fact, the number of sons (more in number) was considered a strength for the entire family," he added. In the same way, he also mentioned that his wife, who was initially maintaining *parda*, continues with her work of grazing animals like her mother-in-law in the later phase of her life. Initially, at the beginning phase of marriage, he was against the outdoor visit of his wife. However, the overall family context changed his perception. He describes, "the amplifying work responsibility with increasing number of children and increasing age of my mother opened the space for working outdoors for my wife."

Similarly, he also stated that the context changed after modern schooling became popular. In this changing context, the education of children became compulsory in the locality. He, in the early phase, admitted his sons to a nearby government school while he was hesitating to send his daughter to a modern school. Initially, he argued that there was a negative atmosphere that made parents uneasy about sending their daughters to school. He said that the visiting of daughters to modern schools with coeducation leaves people with negative remarks affecting the procedure of her arranged marriage. However, his perception changed with the pace of time when people started demanding an educated daughter-in-law. This leads to changes in his perception, and the earlier hesitation is no longer sustained, leading him to admit his younger daughter to modern schooling.

### **Life sketch at 45**

Miya (64) shared the impact of modern education in dismantling his earlier perceptions. His perception against coeducation to maintain the practice of *parda* for adolescent girls changed after modern education in a coeducational school became compulsory for every parent. He mentioned that the debate around modern education has become as intense as the discussions around caste and religion in terms of defining one's identity and social status. He further stated that the education of children has taken on a new dimension, as it has become a means to amplify one's prestige in society. Children who perform well in school or score high marks in the SLC examination are seen as adding value to their personal and family profiles.

He also mentioned that the influence of social media has also contributed to changing the narratives of the locality. Miya (64) added that the mainstream national media were challenging the earlier practice of keeping daughters for household work rather than educating them. The initial local religious perception of differently treating daughters by considering it as natural—was broadcast with a new terminology of 'discrimination' in the media. The newer narrative about sons and daughters challenged the earlier religious beliefs allocating binary roles of males and females.

He mentioned that there was a shifting of the desire among people, for whom, there was growing attraction towards cities. This has started changing the face of the village due to massive migration towards cities. In this phase, he also visited and stayed for a few months in the city. He explains those time phases as,

Better access to transportation and the craze of modern education were making the urban cities filled up with the higher concentration of population. At this phase, like other identical groups, the number of Muslims migrating to urban cities was also increasing. This has provided me a space for expanding a meat shop at cities targeting Muslims who demand *halaal* meat. I handed over the homeland shop to my son and left for cities for the purpose of better earning. During this phase, I operated the meat shop for three months. However, I could not cope with the challenges due to environmental change. That's why I closed the shop and returned back to my home town.

He stated that the stay in the city shuffled his physical get-up. He recalled those phases when he trimmed his beard. He remembered how the concept of a saloon got popular and there increased the practice of visiting a saloon for hair-cut and beard cuts with time flow. With a smile, he said that the big beard symbolizes the religious scholars, and many Muslims, other than religious scholars, hesitate to keep long beard. In addition, he also admitted, "With the growing influence of education, the name of the shop with the symbol like 786 (symbol used to indicate Muslim shops) can be enough evidence to communicate the message of *halaal* meat. So, this trade has no compulsion for a big beard." He also relates that the people, in the changing context, are copying the urban outlook or the cinemas' outfit, which, does not advocate for big beards.

### **Life sketch at 50 and above**

In the interview, he showed his changed perception regarding the size of the family. He shared that the earlier practice of getting a higher number of children is not feasible in the current context. He linked the logic behind a smaller number of children with the higher expenses of education, health, and marriage costs. Similarly, he does not advocate delaying family planning while waiting for sons. His perception of daughters has changed as he mentioned that if the girls were taught properly, they could get easy job opportunities due to the availability of several reservations for girls in government sectors. In the present context, for him, what matters is the proper schooling of children, which includes both sons and daughters.

His changed perception dissolved the idea of binary categorization, allocating public spheres for boys and private spheres for girls, as it was considered traditionally. In the same way, he also mentioned that the children of either Muslims or Hindus enroll in the same private boarding schools. Therefore, the learnings of either category of children are the same. However, he mentioned that the identical divide in the name of religion has been linked with national or global contexts. In recent practice, he argued that children from a closer kinship are making certificates of verification of Muslims and Madhesi for the sake of grasping quotas-led job opportunities. Similarly, he also linked religion, at present, with an 'object' that needed demonstration through social media. He mentioned how his entire family shares pictures of EID and Bakar-EID through personal social media platforms (mobile) by wearing costumes from a market that can reflect religious gestures. He added how the growing influence of social media and transportation has made aware of the dresses (and other food culture) of Muslims, which resulted in the selection of Pathan-suit during the last occasion of Eid. With a smile, he said that such dressing (or food items) ignites more feelings of Muslims in him.

Similarly, he also experienced that the marking as caste category of 'chikada' has become much less relevant with time flow, which was much more vibrant marital criteria previously. At present, the marital arrangements are more derived from the lens of class belonging (in terms of exchange of dowry), educational grading, and types of job enrollments (in terms of cash) within Muslims. Similarly, he also mentioned that cash has become one of the vibrant parameters to judge the prestige of a family.

"In the time flow, after the practice of schooling of children in every family, the differences in between Madhesi and Pahadi was narrowing down," he narrates. He explains the previous context when the Pahadi community was considered an educated section of society. However, the context changed after scoring good grades from children of the Madhesi community. He further states, "The differences between these groups were narrowing down before which there erupt the Madheshi Movement hardening the line of differences in identities." He described those phases when, as a Bhojpuri speaker, he was provided the tag of Madhesi with his title that supplemented his Madhesi feeling during and after the Madheshi movement.

He also added that the identity of Muslims overloaded and vibrated after the emergence of religious politics from the side of India. he describes,

It has been a long stay in my homeland however the religious air, in the present context, is not the same as previous. In recent times, the practice of distinguishing and otherizing Muslims from locality has increased. It reminds me to the religious belonging of Muslims time and again. During, the time of the Hindu festival (in Kartik), I hesitated to operate my meat shop. Similarly, there has been more fear of being tagged as a beef eater at present.

He argued that the newer meaning of Muslims is narrated through social media by distancing them from Hindus. In his words, he finds that the Hindus, at present, are changed Hindus who distance themselves from Muslims, and the reactionary context helps to eject the feeling of Muslimhood different from that I actually feel. Today I feel distant from Hindus.

## **10. Health Practitioner**

Aasif Mansoor (54), a changed name, is a health practitioner in Bara district. He has been engaged in the profession for more than three decades. He has two sons and one daughter. He has visited several corners of Nepal during his duty.

### **Life sketch at 15**

He described the earlier context and perceptions dominant in those times. He reflected on the earlier phase when he had a strong faith in supernatural powers. This was the time when he, including his family members, used to search for solutions to health issues from *jhar-fuk* (exorcism). He recalled that the people at those times were all similar, to the point that they were bringing religious beliefs and faiths for the treatment of superpower's action. He describes,

In early times, people believed diseases were caused by supernatural powers such as the evil eye. As a result, the remedies were sought through religious or worship practices. Religious scholars and shamans were considered to be experts in treating health-related problems. They used *tabeez* or *laung* (cloves) bonded with religious prayers for the treatment process. I, too, believe religious scholars' instructions for treating disease. Girls were expected to maintain *parda* (modesty) and were treated within the home. Even the issue of childbirth was handled by female practitioners within the society. Females were supposed to avoid contact with strangers males and maintain proper screening.

In the early phase of his childhood, he said that the living contexts taught him about the religious differences in society. Similarly, he also mentioned that he was made aware of the existing categorization of castes and the prevailing hierarchies of upper and lower castes. He recalls the earlier phase to describe his caste-based consciousness as,

The use of wells as the source of water for regular usage defined the categories of caste and religion in their practical implications. There was a practice that Muslims and Dalits needed to make a distance when the caste (non-Dalits) came for water in the well. However, in many other cases, the lines between Hindus (non-Dalits) and Muslims were very thin in their sharing of day-to-day life. The differences in castes or religions can be easily identified by their occupation. In my case, my father was involved in the occupation of carding cotton (*rui dhunae*) and his name carries the surname of *Miya Dhuniya*. This means the male members of Muslims share some characteristics that differentiate them from Hindus. Similarly, Dalits were different from other categories as they faced residential segregation. Similarly, they (Dalits) have been categorized for their dirty occupation. This is also the reason why people treated them as untouchable. Even Muslims maintain distance due to their culture of rearing pigs (*haram*, impure for Muslims).

He also mentioned those phases when the females possessed characteristics different from the males and there are some specific beliefs in Muslim females that are different from females of Hindus. He accepted the role of religion in day-to-day activities. He explained,

The females in the societies had different works from that of males. The females were allocated to private household work while males were more concerned with earnings outdoors. This practice was common among Muslims in the name of *parda* practice where females maintain segregation from other males. In the case of deliveries of babies, there used to be a woman expert who handled the case within the home. Similarly, there was also the role of religion in defining family planning which according to Islamic belief is considered to be illegal. By referencing the religion of Islam, there was a common narrative that a child is the gift of God. It was believed that it was the god who sent the children. He (the God) has provided the child with a mouth so he will be responsible for the arrangement of his feeding and future. So, no one should be worried about the size of children.

While sharing his schooling, he mentioned that he was admitted to a nearby modern government school at the age of 6. In his schooling days, he recalled,

The school was the place of learning for all despite their caste or religion. There was nurturing of common sentiments of being a Nepali in our school. We all students were taught as brothers and sisters despite our inherent backgrounds. Learning the Nepali language as our language at school instilled a sense of pride in me. My identification as Nepali was becoming a collective way of

recognition in most of the areas of domains. This helped me to distinguish myself from other Bhojpuri-speaking Indian nationals. The schooling also taught me that the festival of 'Dashain' is our biggest festival. The educational performances, rather than caste or religion, were the basis for getting admiration in the classroom.

Similarly, Mansoor (64) also mentioned that his increasing sentiment as a Nepali distanced him from religious perceptions over the years. He described the changed narrative as a Nepali as:

After joining government schooling, my Nepali identity became a dominant way of recognition, and the significance of cows to me became intertwined with my national identity. The reverence for the cow as a national animal was nurtured, promoting a culture of respect and worship towards it. In the same way, I embraced Dashain as the greatest Nepali festival and felt connected to it. This feeling departed from the local narrative which defined Muslims as beef-eaters.

While sharing his schooling experiences, he also added a thin experience of visiting the Mosque to learn religious education. He finds that the context of the mosque for schooling was different than that of modern schooling context. He said that there were only males in such schools, and this also constituted a single religious group that followed Islam. Furthermore, he argued that his parent selected modern schooling over religious schooling.

He mentioned that he was married at the early age of 19 to a close kin, which was normal in those days. He added that the previous perception regarding marriage was reaching up to puberty, where a growing mustache on the face indicates the readiness for marriage for boys, while the starting of the menstrual cycle for girls was the indicator of readiness for marriage for girls. He further described that his wife had not attained any schooling, and it was not the topic of investigation at those times. "The general requirements for the marriage of girls were linked with her proficiency in handling home and cooking of food," he says. He also said that he started working in hospitals and came closer with different doctors.

### **Life sketch at 30**

The working atmosphere in the hospital was full of educated staff, and the atmosphere also contributed to dismantling his earlier religious perception about family size. He mentioned that having more children was considered an act of illiterate villagers. For him, he added that the newer dimension to identity was added with a changing atmosphere, making newer categories of literate and illiterate within Muslims. He said that he also became against the larger size of children with time and adopted family planning after he had two sons and a daughter. He shared,

Initially, I too followed the long-held belief to consider children as the blessing of God. I considered it a religious sin to go for an artificial way of stopping the number of children, which I (Muslims) took as a gift from *Allah*... In the later phase, I categorized the practice as an illiterate Muslim culture, and I was proudly involved in family planning like many other educated Muslims.

He mentioned that the changing environment also changed his perception of his daughter's schooling. He started taking his sons and daughters to private modern schools in this phase. The changing atmosphere brought a new understanding of the play of 'inequality' and 'discrimination.' He, then, became aware of discrimination between son and daughter which he previously considered religiously valid. His earlier religious perception of binary division of roles—allocating public sphere for males and private spheres for females—was challenged in the newer atmosphere set by education and transportation. This was the time when he started advocating for equal opportunities for males and females. He argued that he was not involving his daughter in the cooking and that illiterate traditions only follow such discrimination. He then marked those who create discrimination in the name of

differences as narrow-minded and traditional.

He said that he had followed the practice of *parda* previously and was against women's exposure to other males. However, the changing context changed his ways of thinking. He added that he became open-minded after education made him follow science derived practices which departed him away from *jhar-fuk* (exorcism) and belief in religious ways of treatment. This, he argued, allowed him to visit the hospital for all health issues and marked earlier religious-dependent treatment as superstitious. He spoke, referencing the delivery of his wife in the hospital by doctors. He further mentioned that he could not risk his wife's life by letting her go for home delivery in the name of *parda*. Rather, he consulted a doctor despite the sex of the doctor. He describes,

In hospitals, educated doctors and staff follow a scientific process to treat patients. They have access to modern tools to handle serious cases, which has resulted in a decrease in the number of deaths of children and mothers. On the other hand, home deliveries are risky and lack scientific tools and equipment. Therefore, doctors are assigned with this job of treatment and their gender should not be a factor in determining their ability. We need well-educated and experienced doctors for delivery, regardless of their gender. The practice of "*parda*" is a traditional and narrow-minded belief.

### **Life sketch at 45s**

In the working days, he mentioned that the atmosphere was diverse in nature. This included different caste groups and religious groups, including male and female. The working atmosphere has reduced the sense of sticking to inherent identity; rather, he mentioned that all the colleagues treated each other as friends. He argued that the working field has provided a new dimension of identity where there is respect and affection for all mates despite their identical backgrounds. Similarly, he also mentioned that sharing food with each other became common in day-to-day life, which was limited previously only during festivals.

In the same way, he also included the significance of easy transportation facilities that make trips in longer distances easier and faster. He gave credit to his education, working environment, and traveling, which brought him to revise his earlier religious perceptions. He mentioned that he became very flexible and open, which supported him in erasing the lines drawn between males and females. Similarly, it also erases the line of treating people with the tag of upper caste and lower caste.

### **Life sketch at 50 and above**

In the latest scenario, he mentioned that traveling has become common. In today's context, the important thing he mentioned was the value of money (cash) over identity. He adds,

The cash has been mobile, and it adds value to your identity wherever you go in the present era of easy transportation. In such cases, there will be no concern about the size of agricultural land, family legacy, or caste (religious) legacy like it was earlier.

In his words, the changing context has pushed him to shift his perception. He showed that the important criteria for arranging the marriage of children had been education within his religious groups. In this phase, he argued that the earlier issue of caste among Muslims has been blurred during marriage. The well-settled Muslim families (in terms of economic and occupation) are fewer in number (he said Muslims number less and the education profile of Nepali Muslims is also lower) and every other Muslim family is looking to make relationships (marital) in that particular family. This, in his view, is the reason why the caste line become less significant in the latest context.

Similarly, he also mentioned that another indicator added to Muslims for the arrangement of marriage other than caste, that is, dowry. He said that he was initially against the culture of dowry following the line of religion. However, he added that marriage among Muslims needs to be operated by families with similar economic status. This is why the idea of dowry is relevant in the present context. He adds,

Previously, Islamic norms, values, and caste categories played a decisive role in the arrangement of marriage among Muslims. The values of Islam forbid the dowry exchanges, and I was also against this practice. However, in the present context, the introduction of modern education has become an influential feature in determining societal prestige. In such a scenario, every parent wants to marry their daughter to a male with a good academic profile, occupational position, income, and proper parental properties. Therefore, modern education prioritizing individual values has led to competition for finding the best male match within Muslim among parents of their daughters. This scenario has shadowed earlier inquiries into caste within Muslims, and it has also resulted in the practice of dowry, which is usual for all. I am too involved in this practice to find a capable match for our daughters.

In a similar way, he added that modern education has become a determinant in the current scenario to determine the age of marriage. In the latest context, he presented his changed perception of marrying sons and daughters. He says, “The son should be married after he gets stable in his leg while the daughter should also complete her graduation before her marriage.” In this phase, he also became against the marriage of children (grandchildren) in closer kinship. He said that this practice is taken as shameful within educated friend circles, including Muslims.

He also commented on how social media and the usage of mobile phones have affected the early culture of the rule of avoidance of married daughters-in-law from senior male members of the family. In his early years, he mentioned that he was the part of the culture however, in the later phase, he changed the practice, considering it as traditional. He described:

In the early context, there was a culture among married females (daughters-in-law or *patoh*) to maintain a distance from senior male members (sasura buwa or sasur, jethaju or bhasur) of the family. However, the popular trend of uploading photos of every family member within a single frame on social media has impacted early local customs. In fact, the earlier culture favoring the rule of avoidance is considered traditional among the newer generation, and there is an expansion in contrasting cultures of being ‘frank’ with each other in the family without hesitation, and it is taken as modern culture.

He showed the changing context due to social media that is affecting the earlier culture and helping to revise the earlier set perceptions.

**Annex 2**  
**Check-list for Life History Method Interview**

**Informant's Personal Introduction**

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Occupation:
4. Education:
5. Age of Marriage:
6. Num. of children  
Male children size:  
Female children size:
7. Caste belonging within Muslim:

**Preliminary Questions for the phase of 15s**

8. How was your early story at the phase of the 15s?
9. How do you experience your Muslim identity at local and familial context?
10. What is your experience of schooling and what are experienced changes in identity after schooling?
11. How do you perceive your Muslimhood in the early phase of 15s?
12. In what way you perceive Muslim womanhood?
13. How do you perceive caste-hood and Hindu-hood?

**Preliminary Questions for the Phase of 30s**

14. How is your life story at the phase of your 30s?
15. How did you experience Muslim identity after joining working atmosphere?
16. How did you experience a shift in self-identity after the impact of travel, urbanization, and migration?
17. In what way did the influence of the nation-state affect the identity?

Preliminary Questions for the Phase of 45s

18. How did the Madhesh movement influence Muslim identity?
19. In what ways did the relationship with India and other Islamic states bring changes in self-identity?

**Preliminary Questions for the Phase of above 50.**

20. How did your socio-biological factor with age going above 50 bring a shift in the self-identification of Muslims?
21. In what way did travel, and local familial context impact self-identity above the age of 50?